



*Purity is dedicated to Claire, Liz, 'Baby', and Ben ...
I'll never forget you guys!*

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I do not claim any rights to InuYasha or the characters associated with the anime/manga.
Those rights belong to Rumiko Takahashi, et al
I do offer my thanks to her for creating such vivid characters for me to terrorize.*

~Sue~

~~~~~Purity~~~~~

~~Chapter 1~~

~Midoriko

Kagome stared in incredulous silence at the newly-restored Shikon no Tama in her hands. It was finished. The ordeal that had carried her through time again and again . . . was over.

Where was the sense of peace, the feeling of accomplishment, that she had believed would come with this?

Kagome wiped away a tear that slid down her cheek.

*Sango, leaning over Kohaku's lifeless body, wailing in despair as his soul slowly faded from the world.*

Another tear slipped.

*Miroku, staring in astonished disbelief as his kazaana—the Wind Tunnel—sealed itself, as though he expected it to reopen and draw them all into the vortex.*

Another tear slipped.

*Shippou's distress, trying his best to hold back the little girl, Rin, while she struggled against his grip. Rin, cringing and crying silently when Sesshoumaru unleashed a piercing howl, cradling the broken form of Kagura in his one arm.*

Another tear slipped.

*Kouga, gouging the jewel fragments out of his legs. Kouga, touching her cheek and telling her that she was better off with 'dog-shit', after all. Kouga, closing his eyes one last time as she begged him not to die.*

Another tear slipped.

*Kikyou's expression as she realized, to her own horror, that she could not take the Shikon no Tama with her again, as she had the first time she'd died. Kikyou, handing the sparkling jewel to Kagome with an enigmatic smile on her face. "It's your task now, Kagome. Let no one take it from you. The Jewel of Four Souls has chosen you to protect it." Kikyou, offering Kagome the quiver of arrows she carried on her back. "These are yours now, too. Take care of . . . everything."*

Another tear slipped.

*InuYasha . . . InuYasha screaming for Kikyou not to go, even as she faded out of his sight, out of his grasp—even as he broke Kagome's heart . . . again.*

Another tear slipped.

Kagome sighed and stood. She'd fretted over her decision for the last four days while they journeyed back to Kaede's village. She'd agonized over what she should do with the jewel. It had occurred to her that she alone could banish the jewel forever—the beautiful stone that had caused so much pain to so many for so long. She knew now what to do with it. Staring at InuYasha on that cliff as he looked so insanely broken while Kikyou faded from sight, what else could Kagome do?

She stared at the edge of the Bone Eater's Well with a thoughtful frown as she fastened the chain that held the jewel around her neck. Curiously, InuYasha hadn't tried to take it from her even once. Then again, he'd been so quiet, so oblivious to everyone and everything since that day, that Kagome didn't think he even sensed it when she had slipped away as the sun rose this morning. She had only stopped long enough to do one last thing after brushing her lips through the air over each of her friends' cheeks as they slept.

Kagome stopped beside InuYasha. Normally the half-demon would wake at the slightest noise. Oddly, he was deeper into his slumber than anyone. Then again, he hadn't really slept in days . . . possibly weeks. So intent he had been, on tracking down Naraku, that many nights Kagome had stirred in the wee hours to see him sitting alone—either staring into the campfire with a marked frown or reclining high in a tree above, his back straight and proud, as though he was meditating.

InuYasha hadn't stirred as she had carefully lifted the prayer beads from around his neck. She held her breath, hoping that he wouldn't wake as she painstakingly removed the last remaining symbol of the bond between them that she had foolishly thought they had. After finally pulling the strand of beads and fangs free, she stared at it for a long time before slipping it into her backpack. Was it so selfish of her to want to keep something—*anything*—that had been his?

She sighed again and let herself drop into the well. More tears fell as the light engulfed her, the gentle warmth that was so familiar. It was the last time she'd use this portal. Her friends that had come to mean as much as family to her . . . she knew she'd never see them again.

Why hadn't she roused them, told them how much each of them meant to her, how she would never forget their times together? Kagome wiped away a bitter tear and drew a ragged breath. '*Because,*' she thought with an inward sigh, '*they would have tried to stop me.*' She winced. At least, everyone but InuYasha. She had been so naïve. For two years she'd convinced herself that she could help him, that she could make him see his way past Kikyō. In the end . . .

In the end, she hadn't been able to do that.

The image flashed through her mind again, just as painful now as it had been the first time. InuYasha holding onto Kikyō's outstretched hand while the soul collectors wrapped around her and pulled her away from him. His voice cracking as he roared her name time and again as she floated away out of sight. Her words had been no more than a whisper on the breeze. Kagome had heard Kikyō's voice, but hadn't been able to discern her words. InuYasha probably hadn't, either. He screamed so loudly she doubted he even realized that Kikyō had spoken.

Kagome gasped as her feet gently hit the bottom of the well. The sight of the ladder was an all-too-shocking reminder that she was back in the place where it had all begun. She stifled a sob with the back of her hand before forcing herself to climb out of the well. One last time . . .

When she stood, looking down in the well, Kagome strengthened her faltering resolve. She had to stop crying. It wouldn't do, for her to go inside the shrine and to let her mother see her so red-faced and puffy-eyed.

Slowly, deliberately, Kagome let her bag drop from her fingers, grasping the warm jewel in her palm before giving one quick tug. The chain broke with a snap, leaving the winking stone staring at her in the wan light of the well-house.

*'Don't be hasty!'* her mind demanded. *'What if you're mistaken?'*

Kagome shook her head furiously. She knew she wasn't mistaken, and she didn't dare wait a moment longer. If she was going to do this, then it had to be now—now before her heart made her falter. Now, before InuYasha came looking for her . . .

*'Would he? Would he really?'* she couldn't help but ask herself.

Sighing and rubbing her head, her grip on the Shikon no Tama tightened. "He would. If nothing else, I'm his 'responsibility'," she mumbled, her voice oddly missing any irritation, any traces of regret. No, she had made that remark in a very matter-of-fact tone. Why wasn't she still angry? Why didn't she want to curse him, to condemn him?

*'Because . . .'* her mind muttered softly. "Because I love him," she whispered.

With that realization, Kagome rasped out an incredulous sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. She clamped her hand over her lips, as though she could hold back her grief with the action.

The time was now.

A strange calm ebbed over Kagome's body and soothed the ragged edges of her heart. Determination alone had carried her through so much, and it would see her through this as well. Slowly, her hand curiously steady, Kagome brought the Shikon no Tama up to her chest. With both hands she cradled it against her heart as her eyes closed and her mind cleared.

She must have looked like a little girl kneeling beside her bed to offer her prayers. That thought was especially poignant, and Kagome squeezed her eyes closed tighter still, until the pain had waned. "I want to use this Gift to restore her . . . the woman who InuYasha loves. I want them—Kikyō and InuYasha—to have what they lost so long ago," she whispered. "Please, Midoriko . . . please grant this and be freed . . ."

A comforting warmth washed over her like a summer breeze. Kagome felt her hair being swept off her face, and she smiled, even though a torrent of tears, hot and furious, began to course down her cheeks once more.

The Shikon no Tama grew almost too hot to hold in her hands. Her grip instinctively tightened. Kagome yelped in surprise and raised her hands to shield her eyes. It was good thing her eyes had been closed. If she had been looking, the light probably would have blinded her.

"'Twas you, gentle woman," a kind voice said as the wind died down. It came unexpectedly from right beside her, but it didn't startle Kagome at all. Her eyes slowly opened, taking a moment to adjust after the blinding flash of light.

The woman standing beside Kagome was also bathed in a strange white light—the same light had just shone from the Shikon no Tama. Her long raven locks fell well below her waist, and her Miko's clothing was oddly covered by ancient armor. Kagome recognized her instantly. Her eyes flared, and she gasped. "M . . . Midoriko?"

The woman smiled warmly at Kagome and nodded just enough to affirm Kagome's question. "I don't have much time, Kagome. I came only to offer you my thanks."

Kagome tried to return the smile but her eye caught sight of the well, and she gasped at what she saw: the gaping hole was filled with water. She leaned over, her hands resting on the edge, and stared at her reflection. "It's really closed . . . I really won't see him ever again." Her tone was disbelieving yet resigned. She had suspected this would be the ultimate result of her wish, but she had hoped . . . Hot tears welled behind her eyes yet stubbornly refused to fall.

Midoriko watched with a marked frown as two tears slipped down Kagome's cheeks, hitting the water and rippling outward from the point of impact. She could feel the all-consuming pain in

the young woman's heart—pain so raw and so cutting that Midoriko flinched as the emotion shot through Kagome and into her. *'So young to experience such heartbreak . . .'*

"It was that young hanyou, wasn't it?" Midoriko asked gently. "The one they call InuYasha?"

"InuYasha . . ." Kagome sighed and ducked her head as a fresh wash of tears coursed down her face. "I thought . . . I thought that if I loved him enough, he'd . . . but he couldn't . . ."

Absolute understanding washed over Midoriko. Her expression said that Kagome didn't have to explain any further. "So you gave him the one thing you believed he truly wanted, even though it cost you everything."

Kagome nodded. "What else could I do?"

"This woman . . . she's the one who protected the Shikon no Tama before you, isn't she?"

"Kikyuu." Kagome made herself say the name out loud, and she flinched, as though the very sound of it possessed the power to wound her. Kagome closed her eyes against the sharp, stabbing pang that shot through her heart. "Ki . . . Kikyuu," she whispered softly. "Yes, she was."

Midoriko sighed softly, using her fingers to smooth the hair out of Kagome's face before gently turning her chin to make the young woman look her in the eye. "I lost my ability to see into her mind when she died, child. Then, when the jewel came to you, the two of us forged a bond. I whispered to your heart, and you answered me. I have always comforted you just as you have always protected me."

Kagome nodded silently. Because the jewel had been housed in her body, Midoriko had been with her from the start. In all her life, Kagome had never felt truly alone. It was impossible to remember a time when she hadn't sensed that there was someone near, someone who couldn't be seen—someone who cushioned her from the harsher realities that she'd had to face.

But now that Midoriko was free . . . Kagome realized this even as a consuming sense of loss filled her. Her grip on the now-dormant jewel in her fist tightened. The gentle presence that had cosseted her for so long was gone because Midoriko's soul was freed.

It hit her all at once. She'd already lost InuYasha, and by her own choice. She'd lost Sango, Miroku, Kaede, and her darling Shippou, as well. Now Midoriko's aura would leave her, too.

Midoriko stroked Kagome's cheek gently with the pad of her thumb. "You freed me without any regard for what you desired. Because of your wish, the jewel has been purified forever, and the youkai that sought its power will forever be silenced. For that, Kagome, I will free you in return."



## ~Chapter 2~

### ~Missing Prayers~

InuYasha woke with a start. Instinctively, he lifted his chin and sniffed as his eyes scanned the darkened interior of Kaede's small hut. He wasn't sure what made him stir. Something wasn't right. The air felt . . . empty.

"Kagome," he whispered as his eyes fell on the empty pallet where Kagome had slept last night. Shippou was curled next to the pallet with Kirara. He shook his head. She probably went to bathe or to find something to eat. Then he frowned. No, the air that surrounded him was weak, pallid. Kagome always left a subtle, rich texture in her wake. In fact, the only times he could recall feeling such a dismal sense of emptiness were the times when she dropped down her well and would return to her own time.

With a snort, InuYasha sprang to his feet and stomped out of the hut. How dare that stupid girl leave—again—without letting him know? Well, he'd have to explain to her one more time that she wasn't allowed to do that, wouldn't he?

All in all, InuYasha was in a pretty foul mood as he trudged out of the village and in the direction of the well.

He stopped abruptly as he reached the edge of the forest. Turning his head sharply, his brow furrowed, and he glanced around, his mind refusing to believe what he smelled.

"InuYasha."

He blinked quickly, eyes narrowing as he stared in stunned silence. Kikyou walked slowly out of the foliage directly toward him, an odd smile lifting the corners of her lips. She didn't smell . . . dead . . . "Ki . . . Kikyou?" he whispered. "How?"

Kikyou's smile faded as her head tilted to the side in obvious confusion, herself, as though she didn't really understand how she had been brought back to life, either. "I don't know, InuYasha . . ."

"But your soul collectors—"

She chuckled, and the sound of it was warm, light. "They were taking me to the other world," she began. "Then suddenly they put me down and dissolved in a flash of white light. It was odd, watching the souls I'd collected disperse."

InuYasha shook his head, hardly daring to believe what his nose told him. “You . . . You’re . . . *alive?*”

Kikyou nodded, a brilliant smile breaking over her features. “I’m alive once more . . .” Her eyes brightened as she stared at InuYasha. She looked as though she was about to ask him something but she frowned as her gaze dropped to his haori. “Where are your beads?”

His head dropped at her question, and he put his hands up, feeling around for the dark blue bead and fang kotodama necklace. It was gone? And why did he feel a sudden sense of loss with the realization? He reigned in the urge to bolt back to Kaede’s hut to turn it over, if need be, to find the missing prayer beads. “Kagome,” he murmured.

Kikyou looked sad, just for a moment. “Where *is* Kagome?” she finally asked.

InuYasha snorted. “Keh! As if I have any idea. Stupid bitch, anyway. I think she jumped into that damn well again, and she didn’t even say when she’d be back.”

Kikyou raised an eyebrow artfully even as a small smile filtered over her features again. She fell into step next to InuYasha as he continued on his trek to the well. “Honestly, InuYasha . . . does she really appreciate being called that foul name?”

He stopped short, as though the idea that Kagome didn’t like being called a bitch hadn’t crossed his mind. “What am I supposed to call her? I’m a *dog* hanyou, remember?”

Dark brown eyes darted around the open field surrounding the Bone Eater’s Well. Satisfied that there were no threats in the vicinity, Kikyou turned her attention back to the hanyou. “‘Kagome’ would be nice. Or ‘girl’, even, but *that?* InuYasha—”

Cutting her off with a low growl as they neared the edge of the well, InuYasha frowned in disbelief. It was wrong, very wrong. The change in the air, the shifting of the aura surrounding the Bone Eater’s Well . . . A quick inspection raised more questions, and InuYasha shook his head. He didn’t understand. *‘Why is the well filled with water?’*

“That’s not right,” he said slowly, stepping closer to the well. “What the hell . . .?”

Kikyou frowned, too. A slow understanding dawned on her, and she shook her head, as though she refused to believe what she knew in her heart. “She did it,” Kikyou said quietly. “She purified the jewel.”

InuYasha shook his head in denial. “No fucking way! She wouldn’t have. That would mean . . .” He couldn’t even finish his statement. It was too awful to consider. “K . . . Kagome.”

He didn’t see the pained look filter across Kikyou’s face. Certainly she knew that things had changed. She’d known for a very long time that InuYasha’s heart was full of Kagome now. In simplest terms, Kikyou was his past. Kagome was his future. So why was she here?

After the battle with Naraku, Kikyou's soul collectors had taken her away. She'd barely had enough time to give Kagome the remaining sacred arrows she'd prepared, and to ask the young woman to watch over InuYasha. She had wanted to say goodbye to him but her collectors were carrying her away, and though she had tried to call out to him, he hadn't heard her. He had called after her. He had only wished to say goodbye, Kikyou had known but the vision of Kagome's stricken face flashed through her mind, and in that moment, Kikyou understood. "She did it. She's the reason I've returned. Kagome . . . that's how Kagome purified the jewel . . ."

InuYasha's golden eyes shot up to meet Kikyou's as a nameless dread—a slow fear—rose to suffocate him. It bathed his eyes in a savagely intense shade of golden yellow. "No," he said quietly, his voice hostile, livid as his eyes crackled gold, twisting on itself, writhing, breathing, glimmering. "She wouldn't have! Why would she do something so fucking stupid? What the—?"

Kikyou's defiant glare cut him off. "Wouldn't she, InuYasha? She would, if she thought that it was what you wanted. Was it? Did you tell her you wished I could return?"

"Uh . . ." He sighed and let his gaze fall away. "No," he finally admitted. "I didn't tell her that."

Kikyou swallowed hard as tears gathered in her eyes. She knew what he was thinking but she had to hear him say it. "You chose her long ago, didn't you?" InuYasha had the grace to flush and couldn't meet Kikyou's gaze. Kikyou forced a small smile. "It's better that way," she allowed. "Kagome's changed you, taught you that it's all right to depend on someone else."

InuYasha swung around, clenching his hands in tight fists. A million flashes of Kagome's smile dug at him, tore at him. *'Why did she do this? What was she thinking?'* His tone was surprisingly hushed when he spoke. If he raised his voice, the images of Kagome would shatter and be lost to him, wouldn't they? "I can't . . . I can't get to her . . ." His expression was enough to bring tears to Kikyou's eyes. He looked lost, as though his entire world had just collapsed on him. "What can I do?"

"Tell me the truth, InuYasha . . . When you met Kagome . . . I never had any hope of winning back your affections, did I?" she asked quietly.

InuYasha flinched. The question was so softly uttered, so completely unlike her . . . Kikyou was strong, brave. She never showed vulnerability. Yet now she had. He wished he could lie. He wished he could tell her what she wanted to hear. *'Kagome's smile . . .'* He shook his head, refusing to meet Kikyou's gaze. "I'm sorry," he said instead as he wheeled around, unable to face the well any longer. "I didn't want . . . I tried not . . . I'm . . . I'm sorry, Kikyou."

Kikyou forced another smile though a tear escaped from each of her eyes to trail down her cheeks. "Don't be sorry, InuYasha. I never have been."

Suddenly, InuYasha's temper snapped, and he flopped down, punching his fist into the ground hard. "How could she do something so damn *stupid*?" he roared, his voice thick with rage . . . Or at least he told himself that it had to be fury, this emotion that blocked his throat and made it

hard to speak. “*Stupid fucking bitch!* She—” He gulped hard and shook his head before going on. “She said she wanted to stay with me . . . She said she’d never leave me alone . . . she . . . she *promised* . . .”

Dropping to her knees beside him, Kikyou tugged on InuYasha’s shoulders. He resisted for just a moment then let her pull him into her embrace. Her action was meant to comfort him. It made him feel even more alone as jarring sobs escaped him, raged through him.

She shushed him, rocked him, smoothed his hair as though he was a child. Vague memories of his mother doing the same thing filtered through his mind but faded as visions of Kagome’s smile replaced them and forced more jagged tears from his soul.

Though Kikyou’s heart ached with the undeniable truth, it was InuYasha who was truly suffering. Because Kagome thought that InuYasha still wanted to be with her, the girl had done the unthinkable. She’d wished Kikyou back to life and had thus sealed the only way that InuYasha had to get back to her.

It seemed like forever before InuYasha stopped sobbing. The discordant sound of his grief colored the air and rattled the serenity of the meadow. Finally he pulled away and wiped the lingering tears off his cheeks, his expression disgusted, hostile. “It’s all right, InuYasha. You can weep for someone you love.”

“Keh!” he snorted without meeting Kikyou’s gaze. He reached up to touch the necklace that was no longer there. Amazingly, another wash of tears sprang to his amber eyes. Kikyou bit back the desire to reach for him again.

“There is a way,” Kikyou said softly. InuYasha’s eyes flashed to meet hers, the intensity of his expression daring her to lie. She didn’t. “Think on it well, InuYasha. Once you pass through, you cannot return. I’m not powerful enough to keep it open.”

InuYasha didn’t fully understand what Kikyou meant. He understood that she was telling him that she could open the well for him to go to Kagome. But to never come back . . .?

It only took him a second to decide. His life here had been nothing but pain and harsh realities. He had friends here, but Kagome . . . Kagome was on the other side of that well, and Kagome had somehow become his family. Was there ever even a question?

“You’ll open it?” he asked quietly.

“I will, for you, but . . . Do you not wish to say goodbye to your friends?”

As impatient as he was to go, he knew he had to say his farewells, first. After the months and months of traveling together, he owed them all that much. He stood up, squaring his shoulders, and started to head back. Suddenly he stopped and whirled around to face Kikyou once more. “What about you?”

A flash of sadness washed over her features but was replaced by an enigmatic smile. “Don’t worry about me, InuYasha. Kagome . . .” her eyes dropped to her lap, and she didn’t look up again. “She loves you more than she loves herself, and I . . . I will go on. All will be the way it was meant to be.”

InuYasha digested her words and offered her a comforting squeeze on her shoulder, deliberately ignoring the strange undercurrent that emphasized her words. Then he bounded away and disappeared back into the forest.

Thought she’d escape him, did she? Had she really believed that he’d let her disappear from his life without as much as a second thought?

Anger welled up inside him again. *‘Damn that woman! Why does she always do this? Just when I thought that it was all over, that there would finally be a chance for me to . . . and she has to run off and fuck everything up. Well, I’ll show her!’*

“Just you wait, Kagome!” he muttered as he zipped toward the village. “I’ll beat you black and blue, I swear . . . or—”

*‘Or you could kiss her,’* his mind chortled. He snorted at his own thoughts as he pushed off the ground to soar above the trees again. “Keh!”

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## ~Chapter 3~

### ~Realizations~

Kagome groaned softly and lifted her hands to rub over her face. She grimaced. Her entire body ached.

With a wide yawn, she sat up and swung her legs off the bed before arching her back to stretch. She'd had a weird dream. She'd been talking to a beautiful woman in the old well-house about wishes and for some reason, Kagome had been really, really sad . . . She slouched and rubbed her eyes with balled-up fists. She couldn't remember anything else about it. *'What an odd dream.'*

"Kagome!" her mother called as she gently pushed open the bedroom door. "Oh, good, you are awake. I thought maybe you'd overslept."

Kagome glanced up at her smiling mother. Kagome stood. "I'm up," she answered as she stifled another yawn. "I'll be down in a few minutes."

Mrs. Higurashi nodded. "No hurry, dear. I just started breakfast, anyway."

Kagome didn't answer. She yawned again and stumbled over to the closet, rummaging through her clothes to find her prerequisite miniskirt and blouse for school. Whistling a soft tune, she dropped the clothes over her arm and headed out of her room to take a shower.

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Kagome sank down at the breakfast table across from Souta and Grandpa, completely oblivious to the conspiratorial way the two kept smirking at one another. Mama set a plate of eggs before Kagome and smiled as her daughter grabbed up her chopsticks and dove into her food.

"Mmm!" Kagome sighed happily through her mouthful of food. With a wide grin, she looked like she was in heaven. "Delicious!"

Mrs. Higurashi set a small package on the table before Kagome. "Happy birthday, darling!"

Kagome squealed in delight and snatched the festive gift-wrap from the box. The small velvet jeweler's box contained a delicate gold keychain with a small gold pendant shaped like a puppy. The head was hinged to the body. She shook it, and the puppy happily wiggled. Kagome stared at the piece with a wide, wistful smile. "It's adorable! Thanks, Mama!"

Souta leaned over the table and plunked a small gift bag beside her plate. “Open it! It’s from Grandpa and me!”

Kagome cast him a quizzical glance before hesitantly lifting the bag. Her grandfather wasn’t renowned for his ability to choose a suitable present. Kagome’s reluctance was obvious. “A dried paw of something?”

Grandpa made a face and sat back with a pout, arms crossed stubbornly over his chest. “Disrespectful! Kids today have no respect for the wiser members of the community!”

Kagome rolled her eyes as she unwillingly dug into the bag. She refrained from comment as she pulled out a small wooden box. Hand polished and very old with intricate carvings all over the top, Kagome couldn’t help but gasp as she stared at the beautiful piece. Her eyes rounded in wonder, and she lifted her gaze to meet her brother and grandfather’s. “You two? Got me this?”

Grandpa puffed out his chest proudly. “Of course! It’s not every day my only granddaughter turns seventeen!”

She was staring so intently at the box that it took a moment for her grandfather’s words to sink in. When they did, she lifted her eyes without moving her head. “Seventeen?” she echoed just before she tossed back her mane of midnight hair and laughed. “I’m only fifteen today.”

Her mother’s soft chuckle drew Kagome’s attention. “Fifteen, Kagome? Really! You shouldn’t tease your grandfather so!”

She stared down at the box now with a marked frown. *‘They think I’m joking? Too weird. What about my last birthday? Why don’t I remember turning sixteen?’*

Kagome got up and put her things in her room before snatching up her book bag and heading for the front door. The feeling that something was off still nagged at her. Just beyond her grasp, there was something that she felt like she needed to remember. “I’m leaving, Mama! Grandpa! See you after school!”

She didn’t wait for a reply as she jerked the door so it swung closed behind her. The stairs were taken two at a time, and Kagome stepped onto the sidewalk before the shrine with her thoughtful frown still in place.

A sudden image of a campfire, of three faces that she ought to know but couldn’t place filtered over her but were gone before she could make sense of them, and try as she might, Kagome couldn’t bring their faces back into focus.

*‘Happy birthday, Kagome! . . . What is a birthday again?’*

*‘Oh, Shippou . . .!’ Gentle laughter . . .*

Kagome stopped abruptly and blinked in surprise. The child's voice was vaguely familiar. The other one . . . was hers?

“Higurashi! Wait up!”

Kagome turned at the sound of her name and watched in bemusement as Houjou loped up to her, a wide smile on his face. “Happy birthday, Kagome . . . Why didn't you wait for me?”

Kagome turned away to hide her frown and started forward again. “Wait for you?” she echoed. *‘Why would I wait for Houjou? It's not like he walks me to school every day . . .’*

Houjou mistook her tone for one of aloof irritation and pulled her close with an arm around her shoulders. “You're not still mad at me, are you? I didn't really forget your birthday! I was just joking! See?”

She jerked back in surprise as he thrust a package under her nose. When she didn't take it right away, he sighed. “You are still mad, aren't you?”

Actually, she was trying to shrug off his arm without seeming too obvious about it. She took the package and managed to step away from him in what she could only hope passed for amazement. His arm dropped, and he grinned expectantly. “Go ahead. Open it.”

For some reason, Kagome was nervous about opening the gift. She shot Houjou a nervous look before ripping off the decorative pink paper. A small box fell out of the wrapping, and she stared at it. “What's this?”

“I told you. It's your present. Open it already!”

She did. Slowly. She lifted out the small gold locket and snapped it open. Her picture was in one half. His was in the other. “I can't accept this,” she replied automatically as she extended the beautiful piece to him.

Houjou frowned. “Of course you can, Kagome. Why couldn't you?” He took the locket and stepped behind her, looping the necklace over her and working the clasp.

“Houjou—”

He gently pulled her hair out of the chain and let it drop over it. “It's fine, Kagome. I wasn't upset yesterday. I knew you didn't really mean those things.”

What things? Had they had some sort of disagreement? About what? She sighed softly. Something wasn't right. Why was Houjou acting like he was her boyfriend? And why did she feel like she was betraying . . . someone else?

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InuYasha didn't glance up as he tossed pallets around and rummaged about with muttered curses and discernible displeasure.

Kaede rolled her eyes at the wreckage he was leaving in his wake. "InuYasha, be ye all right?"

His answer was a hefty grunt as he dislodged a plank in the floor and bent down to peer into the open space.

"What are you looking for?" Sango asked, her tone reasonable, almost consoling. InuYasha dropped the board back into place and scowled at the floor as he stomped on the loose plank to re-secure it. "Damn it."

"Where's Kagome?" Miroku asked suddenly, his expression darkening as he narrowed his gaze on the hanyou.

InuYasha straightened up and abandoned his search when he caught the condemning looks he was receiving from every living being in the hut. "What? Just because Kagome decided to run off you think I had something to do with it? I didn't do a damn thing!" he bellowed. *'This time,'* he amended to himself with an inward grimace. *'At least, not on purpose.'*

"What are you searching for?" Sango asked again, since InuYasha was finally paying attention. "We can help you look for it if you'd tell us."

InuYasha heaved a heavy sigh, his hand reaching up to touch the place where the necklace should have been. "The . . . the beads . . . I can't find them."

Shippou jumped up and landed on InuYasha's shoulder, peering deep into the hanyou's face with a suspicious eye. "Why aren't you happier? You hate the kotodama rosary."

If the look on InuYasha's face meant anything at all, he was about ready to send the kitsune flying. "Shippou . . ."

Shippou launched himself into Sango's arms. She shielded him from InuYasha as the latter made a mad grab. "Are you saying you don't know where Kagome went?"

InuYasha suddenly flopped down on the floor, his expression more woebegone than any of them could remember seeing before. "She . . . she went home."

Shippou struggled out of Sango's arms and skittered over to put his hands on InuYasha's raised knee. "So you've mentioned, but she'll be back, right? She always comes back."

InuYasha wouldn't meet the young one's gaze. Miroku shot Kaede and Sango a worried glance. Both of them realized something was very wrong, as well. "What *aren't* you saying, InuYasha?" he asked quietly.

InuYasha shrugged almost helplessly, his ears drooping as his head sank a little more. “She . . . Kagome . . .”

A collective gasp filled the air and effectively silenced InuYasha. He glanced up, not surprised to see Kikyou standing just inside the doorway. Kaede looked like she was near fainting, and InuYasha shot over to her, steadying the old woman in case she faltered.

“Kikyou?” Kaede gasped out weakly as InuYasha helped her sit. “Is that really you?”

Kikyou smiled a smile that Miroku and Sango had never seen before. Gone was the sadness, the bitterness that the expression had once held. It was a true smile, a whole smile. “Be easy, Kaede. It is me. I’m alive . . . thanks to Kagome.”

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place, and Miroku gasped, drawing all eyes as he dragged his hand over his face and shook his head in denial. “She . . . she purified it? The Shikon no Tama?”

Kikyou’s smile faded, and she sighed, turning an apologetic look on them all. “She must have believed that InuYasha . . .” she faltered, then drew a deep breath, “that InuYasha wanted to be with me.”

Sango’s expression turned mutinous, and her head swiveled to pin InuYasha with a fulminating glare. “Why would she think that . . . InuYasha?”

He flinched as he flopped back down on the floor again. “How the hell should I know? I didn’t say anything! Crazy bitch, anyway,” he muttered, scraping his claws on the floorboards.

Miroku looked like he was about to knock some of the attitude out of InuYasha as he took a menacing step toward him. Sango reached over to stop the monk. They had a quick conversation lacking words as InuYasha continued to methodically drag his claws over the floor. He ignored the two completely. Finally, Miroku nodded in deference to Sango’s unspoken wishes and stifled the desire to sigh as he hunkered down before the volatile hanyou.

“What did happen, then?” he asked in a mild tone. “Why would Kagome think you wanted such a thing?”

InuYasha didn’t glance up. But he shook his head slowly, almost as though he was admitting to some great defeat, and his ears drooped slightly more. “I don’t know. Nothing happened. Nothing . . .”

“Can’t you go get her?” Sango asked, measuring her tone. She had a feeling that InuYasha was still holding something back. She wanted to know what it was. With the viciousness of a seasoned demon slayer, she bit back the edges of panic that rolled in her belly.

Shoulders slumping even further in his utter defeat, InuYasha sighed. It wasn't the kind of sound he often made. "Sort of."

Shippou hopped down and skittered over to InuYasha. "Sort of?" he echoed, his voice faltering. The kitsune was scared. InuYasha could smell the anxiety in him. "InuYasha?"

InuYasha stared at Shippou with a thoughtful frown. '*What about Shippou? He is too young, too small, to fend for himself.*' He had always made certain that Shippou was safe, that he had food. As much as Kagome had treated the young youkai like he was her own, InuYasha realized with a start that he had, in a way, too. He cleared his throat nervously and lifted his face to stare at his friends. "I can get through," he said softly. "Kikyou said she can open the well. But I can't come back."

Sango gasped, her fingers flying up to flutter at her quivering lips. "You can't mean that!"

InuYasha let his gaze drop away, amber eyes lighting on the kitsune child again. "Shippou? Do you want to come with me?"

Shippou looked stunned. Sango choked back a sob. Miroku wrapped his arm around her in a protective, gentle manner, offering her silent comfort. For once, he kept his hands to himself, for which Sango was grateful. She buried her face in his robe.

Kaede stomped her foot one time, drawing everyone's attention. She stood slowly and pinned Kikyou with an oddly challenging expression. "Do ye mean to do what I think ye mean to do?" she asked, her voice rife with her turbulent emotion.

Kikyou stared at InuYasha for a long moment, a fierce resolve lighting behind her eyes. "He belongs with her, Kaede. Surely you know this as well as I."

"Ye cannot!" Kaede insisted. "Ye know what it means; what ye have planned! Surely it will—"

Head snapping to the side to pin Kaede with a fiercely determined expression, Kikyou made a sound low in her throat suspiciously like a growl. "Enough, Kaede. Speak of it no more. I have made my decision."

Kaede looked as though she wanted to argue. She opened her mouth to do it. In the end, she snapped it closed again and sank back down, as though she'd lost the very strength to stand.

Miroku didn't miss the underlying concern in Kaede's words. "What does she mean, Kikyou?" he asked quietly.

InuYasha interrupted Kikyou's answer, however. He stood up slowly, and, carrying Shippou, he disappeared out the door. Sango let a strangled sob escape as she tore herself away from Miroku's grasp and followed. Kikyou said nothing. But she paused long enough to grasp Kaede's shoulder in a comforting gesture before she, too, left the small dwelling.



## ~Chapter 4~

### ~Truth and Consequences~

InuYasha felt his feet hit the ground with a reassuring pressure as the immediate change of smells engulfed his sensitive nose. As many times as he had traveled to Kagome's time, he hadn't ever quite reconciled himself to the sudden change. The world was such a different place here, with more people, more scents, more *everything*. He sighed. There was no going back now.

He'd left everything behind. He'd almost forgotten Tetsusaiga. Had it not been for Miroku, who grabbed it before leaving Kaede's hut to follow, InuYasha would have jumped into the well without it.

He never thought it would have been so difficult to say goodbye. Sango had tried her best not to weep. The same eyes that had glowed like fire as they had all faced down Naraku only days before had been awash with unshed tears. The tears she hadn't been able to hold back had slid down her cheeks unnoticed. Her hands came up toward his head slowly, hesitantly. He understood her unvoiced question and inclined his head toward her. Sango rubbed his ears. She'd never done that before. But she did so now as a show of genuine affection, and InuYasha let her as she rasped out, "Never forget, InuYasha. Even if we never see one another again, you have friends, and so does Kagome."

InuYasha cleared his throat as Sango's hand fell away. "Keep that pervert in line, will you, Sango?"

She choked out a half-sob, half-laugh and nodded, smiling through another wash of tears.

Miroku hadn't shed a tear though his eyes had been shining with them. He's grabbed InuYasha into a tight hug, which had been uncomfortable for a minute before InuYasha had hugged him back. Closer than he and Sesshoumaru had ever been, InuYasha knew he'd sorely miss Miroku, no matter how perverted the monk tended to get. Miroku had somehow grown to be more of a brother than simply a friend. "Tell Kagome how much you care, InuYasha . . . Tell her that before you tell her anything else. Hold her tight and never let her go."

"I will," he promised.

Finally, InuYasha stopped to hunker down before Shippou. Shippou, who loved Kagome best, loved her like the mother he'd lost long ago. For some reason, after speaking with Kaede, Shippou had decided that he wanted to stay behind. He wouldn't tell InuYasha why. "Will you change your mind?" InuYasha asked softly.

Shippou stubbornly swiped at his cheek with a tiny hand and shook his head. “I must remain here. Sango and Miroku would be lost without me. Besides, you don’t really *want* me to come.”

InuYasha frowned. “What about Kagome?”

Shippou shook his head stubbornly. “Tell Kagome . . . Tell Kagome I’ll miss her.” He drew a ragged breath and finally met InuYasha’s gaze. “Tell her that I love her.”

InuYasha had to swallow a fist-sized lump that rose to choke him at Shippou’s softly uttered words. “Then come with me, you pest.”

Shippou cast Kaede a quick glance then shook his head again. InuYasha was unprepared as the young kitsune launched himself at him only to cling to InuYasha with a death grip around the hanyou’s neck. “I’ll take care of Miroku and Sango,” he promised in InuYasha’s ear. “They’re only humans, after all.”

InuYasha rasped out an incredulous laugh and hugged Shippou, just for a moment. “You do that, Shippou.”

Sango stepped forward and pulled the child off of InuYasha as Kaede mumbled some sort of incantation over InuYasha’s head before squeezing his hand in hers and wishing him and Kagome well. She said that the chant should hide his demon nature from those who wouldn’t understand. For that, InuYasha was grateful. The last thing he needed was to send the people in Kagome’s time into a frenzied panic. She always got nervous when he followed her home. He’d smelled the anxiety on her more than once. She was afraid his dog ears would be seen . . .

Kikyou touched his shoulder. “Are you ready, InuYasha?”

“Kikyou . . .” he trailed off as he turned to stare at her, wishing for all the world that she didn’t look so sad. He reached a hand out toward her then let it drop to his side. She nodded and smiled. Though her eyes were damp, bright, her smile was genuine. He tried to return the sentiment. He just couldn’t.

InuYasha glanced over his shoulder at the others and then leaned over to kiss Kikyou’s cheek. More tears sprang to her eyes, and she furiously blinked them back. He could only hope that the one gesture would be enough to tell her everything that he was unable to say.

Kikyou and InuYasha stared at each other another moment. “Kagome’s a lucky woman,” Kikyou murmured as she brushed away the one tear that escaped to slide down her cheek.

InuYasha could feel his face warm at her words.

Kikyou stepped over to the well and leaned over to lay her hands on the surface. She closed her eyes and mumbled an incantation. The well erupted in a beautiful pink haze, and InuYasha watched in amazed silence as the water slowly receded.

“Go, now!” Kikyou gasped out. InuYasha shot her a questioning look. She was sweating and pale. He opened his mouth to say something but Kikyou interrupted without opening her eyes. “Now, InuYasha! *Go!*”

He didn’t hesitate. “Thank you, Kikyou,” he mumbled as he hopped onto the edge of the well. He heard his friends who had somehow become like family behind him. He stared at each of them for a second before dropping down into the well. He would carry their faces in his mind—in his heart—forever.

InuYasha blinked as the memory faded and sighed. Here he was. There was no going back now.

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Kagome stared at the test paper before her without seeing the questions. Her head hurt. She felt so disjointed yet couldn’t place why. Her friends had all wished her a happy birthday when she and Houjou had arrived at school. Still, it seemed like a peculiar dream. Why did she feel like there was someplace else she needed to be?

The final bell of the day rang, and Eri poked her arm. “Kagome? Kagome! Are you all right? You didn’t even answer one question on the quiz!”

Kagome snatched her paper out of her friend’s view and stiffly stood up. “I have a headache, that’s all,” she replied defensively as she stuffed her books into her bag and headed toward the teacher’s desk to hand in the abysmal test. Eri followed her.

Mr. Kissune glanced at the paper as Kagome dropped it and tried to hurry from the classroom. His voice stopped her. “Miss Higurashi? Can I speak to you for a moment?”

Kagome stifled a groan as Eri hurried out of the room. She slowly turned to face the teacher. He was leaning back against the desk with his arms crossed and a concerned look on his face. She liked Mr. Kissune. He was her favorite teacher, actually. Yet she couldn’t make herself meet his emerald eyes, looking no further than his unfashionably long auburn hair. He always wore it in a short ponytail at the nape of his neck, and, like now, the end of it trailed over his wide shoulder. “Yes, sir?” she forced herself to ask in the silence that had fallen.

He sighed. “Kagome, your work has dropped off considerably lately. Why is that?”

Kagome shifted nervously, hitching her bag strap up higher on her shoulder. “I . . . I have a headache,” she replied, feeling completely lame in telling the half-lie.

When she finally lifted her gaze to meet his, she bit her bottom lip. He was staring at her in an odd sort of way, as though he was trying to read her mind. Finally, he nodded. “Boy troubles?”

“Boy wha—Oh, no! Houjou is wonderful, great,” she blurted, shoving aside that odd twinge of guilt, the same as she had experienced earlier.

Mr. Kissune’s eyebrows lifted. “Houjou?” he echoed. “I didn’t realize you were seeing him.”

Kagome forced a smile. “Of course I am! I’ve been seeing him for two years now.” Her smile faltered. Yes, she had been seeing him that long. Sure she had. Unconsciously, Kagome reached up and grasped the pink orb on her necklace. It somehow comforted her. “Is that all, sir? My friends were going to take me to Wacdnalds for my birthday.”

Mr. Kissune smiled and nodded. “Then you’d better run along, hadn’t you?”

Kagome hurried out of the room with a sigh of relief. Maybe it was that weird dream she’d had last night, she thought to herself. It really had been strange. If only she could remember what, exactly, it was . . .

Kagome didn’t see Mr. Kissune step into the hallway with a thoughtful frown as he watched her hurried retreat. The teacher sighed and shook his head before digging into his pocket for his cell phone. He punched in the first number on his speed dial and hoped that someone would be there.

The deep voice that answered sounded quite bored, almost droll. “Yes?”

“It’s me. Kagome just left.”

A pause on the other end, then a sigh. “And?”

“*And* something’s not right. She says she’s dating Houjou.”

“Who is this ‘Houjou’?”

“What does it matter? She’s not supposed to be dating anyone, let alone some pathetically clueless human.”

“Hmm.”

Kissune snorted. “What do you mean, hmm?”

Another sigh. “Maybe they had a tiff?”

“No way. I remember. Today’s her birthday.”

“And *you* want *me* to stop InuYasha?”

He pulled the phone away from his head long enough to glare at it for a moment before answering. “Yes, Sesshoumaru. I do.”



## ~Chapter 5~

### ~Deviating from the Plan~

InuYasha sat down on the bottom step of the well-house with a sigh. Kagome was probably at school now, and that was for the best. He needed to gather his thoughts before he saw her. It had been a very trying day, and given what he did know, he had a feeling that he had more than a little explaining to do. He sighed. Figuring out where to start in said explanation might take a bit more thought than he had planned . . .

A familiar scent wafted to him on the gentle breeze, and InuYasha's head snapped up. There was only one being who smelled like that . . . He stood and whirled around only to come face to face with the one person he never thought he'd have to see again. "Sesshoumaru."

Sesshoumaru lounged casually in the doorway with a tiny, black haired woman standing beside him. InuYasha sniffed again, frown turning fast into a scowl as he stared at the woman with a dose of disbelief. "You smell like Shi--"

"We don't have time for idle chatter," Sesshoumaru interrupted as he pushed himself out of his slouch. "Come with us."

InuYasha leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest defiantly. "No fucking way."

"Please," the woman spoke up. InuYasha glanced at her again. "Kagome will be home soon, and you can't be here when she comes."

"Why not?"

She tried again, exasperation creeping into her voice though she managed a weak smile. "I'll explain everything, but you have to—"

"Touch me and die, bastard," InuYasha growled as Sesshoumaru reached to grab his arm. Sesshoumaru snorted in response and wrapped his fingers around InuYasha's bicep.

"Stubborn as ever, huh?"

InuYasha blinked in surprise at the kitsune youkai who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. "Who are you?"

The fox demon made a face but grinned. "You just left us and you can't remember me?"

InuYasha's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Shippou?"

"Come on," Sesshoumaru growled, trying in vain to drag InuYasha out of the well house. InuYasha, true to his turbulent nature, jerked away and straightened out his fire rat haori.

"Lay off, Sesshoumaru. I'm not going *anywhere* until I talk to Kagome."

Shippou stepped forward. InuYasha was struck by how different the kitsune looked now. He'd just seen the youkai child minutes before, and now . . . He shook his head. "Damn, Shippou. I can't believe it . . . You're not a pesky little baby anymore."

"It's been nearly five hundred years, baka," Shippou pointed out in a surly tone.

InuYasha grinned despite the irritation of seeing both Shippou as well as Sesshoumaru before he got a chance to talk to Kagome.

Sesshoumaru sighed heavily and shook his head. "I tried to tell you. I tried to do things nicely. Damn shame you never listen to reason."

InuYasha should have expected the blow that came. He should have known that Sesshoumaru would wait until he was preoccupied to attack. Instead a bright flash of pain erupted behind his eyes, and then blackness engulfed his throbbing head just before he hit the ground.

Shippou nudged the hanyou with the toe of his sleek black leather shoe. InuYasha's body lilted from side to side but he didn't wake.

Rin pushed Shippou away and hunkered down beside InuYasha's lifeless body. "Did you have to hurt him, Father?" she demanded, casting Sesshoumaru a pointed glare.

Sesshoumaru shifted uncomfortably. Rin normally called him `Papa`. She was really irritated if she had reverted to the formal `Father` instead. "He'll be fine, and he wasn't listening to reason," Sesshoumaru defended himself.

Rin didn't stop glaring but she accepted his explanation with a brief shake of the head as she pushed InuYasha's long silvery bangs off his forehead to survey the damage. There wasn't any. At least InuYasha could be thankful for that.

Shippou moved his wife aside gently and lifted InuYasha's body as though the hanyou weighed nothing. "Let's hurry before Kagome gets here or he wakes up."

Sesshoumaru was inclined to agree. His half-brother's temper was near-legendary, and he had a strong feeling that InuYasha wasn't going to be happy at the information that he and Shippou had been able to gather over the last couple of years. It would be best to explain everything as far away from the miko as they could.

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Water. Sloshing water, and something damp, clingy, cold on his forehead. He groaned softly and tried to knock the thing away. A persistent touch. “Damn it,” he growled then flinched at his own too-loud voice.

A gentle laugh. Husky, comforting . . . familiar. “Well, well. About time you woke up. I’ll tell the others.”

In his hazy mind, InuYasha recognized that voice. His mind denied it. She was dead. He *knew* she was dead . . .

*Naraku shot out his plant-like runners straight at Sesshoumaru, trying to wrap around him, to absorb the youkai. Naraku had tried that before and had failed. Sesshoumaru hadn’t seen the attack coming, and InuYasha had been too far away to intercept the vines.*

*Kagura had been near enough. She had stepped into the path of the lightning-fast runners. Five had impaled her at once, and all InuYasha could remember was Sesshoumaru’s enraged howl as he shredded the vines as though they were made of paper. In the moment before her soul fled her body, InuYasha had heard her words. “Sesshoumaru . . . You have freed me. I thought . . . you wouldn’t.”*

*And the vicious growl that escaped the youkai had made the hairs stand up on the back of InuYasha’s neck, too. He’d never seen his brother so close to losing control before, and frankly, he never wanted to again.*

“Kagura?” he asked, making an effort to keep his voice low in deference to his still-throbbing skull. “You *died*.”

She chuckled softly and removed the cool cloth from his head. “I did. Sesshoumaru saved me.”

And it made sense. After the battle, InuYasha had seen Sesshoumaru carry Kagura’s body away. He must have used Tenseiga to save her . . . “Where am I?”

He hissed as the cold cloth returned and tried to pull away. His hiss turned into a growl of pain, and he stopped fighting.

“You’re with us, at our home. Sesshoumaru and Shippou brought you.”

Despite the pain in his head, InuYasha managed to struggle into a sitting position and finally forced his eyes open. “Where is that bastard of a brother of mine?” he demanded.

Kagura smoothed her khaki slacks and stood with a sigh. “He’s playing with the children right now but I’ll tell him you’re awake.”

InuYasha's retort was cut short by Kagura's explanation. His brother? Playing? With children?

The unmistakable sound of children's laughter drifted through the open window, and InuYasha couldn't help himself as he strode toward it. Kagura slipped from the room as InuYasha took in the scene below the window with wide-eyed wonder.

Sure enough, Sesshoumaru was sprawled in the grass allowing four children of various ages—a boy and three girls, judging by the look of it—to pummel him unmercifully. From his vantage point, InuYasha could hear Sesshoumaru's laughter. He smiled, despite his gnawing irritation. Had he ever heard Sesshoumaru laugh before?

He shook his head as Kagura slipped into view below. No, he hadn't.

Things certainly changed, didn't they?

"Sorry about knocking you out."

InuYasha whirled around to face Shippou. The kitsune was standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with a tentative smile. InuYasha rubbed his left temple where Sesshoumaru had landed the blow. "Yeah. So why did you guys drag me off? I need to see Kagome, and—"

Shippou coughed. "That's the problem, you see . . . the last two years . . . they've been different."

"What do you mean, different? We hunted the shards, killed Naraku . . . you were there. You remember."

"I remember perfectly well, what happened." Shippou made a face, staring at InuYasha as though the hanyou should know better. "InuYasha, that was five hundred years ago, in real time."

"I think I realized that much," InuYasha snapped, losing the battle with his patience before he could even try to fight for control of it.

Sesshoumaru appeared behind Shippou and stepped around the younger youkai. He crossed the floor and sat in a beautifully carved chair. "We knew what you did. Shippou told me of the well and of your choice. We stayed here, waiting for you. Shippou became a teacher at the miko's school so that he could watch over her when the time came."

"And we've both watched for your arrival. Trouble is, two years ago, when Kagome should have gone through the well, she didn't." Shippou pushed away from the doorframe and sank down in a chair by a small table, staring at InuYasha, waiting for the reaction to come.

InuYasha sank down in the vacant chair. "What do you mean, she didn't?"

Shippou sighed and leaned his elbow on the table, rubbing his forehead in his clawed hand. “I mean, something changed. Something was altered. Somehow, it’s as though the past never happened.”

InuYasha glanced incredulously from the kitsune to his brother and back again. “But I’m here . . . you’re here . . . The past *did* happen . . .”

“*We* know what happened. Your miko obviously doesn’t.” Sesshoumaru crossed his arms over his chest and leveled a look at InuYasha. “She doesn’t remember me or Shippou . . . or you.”

InuYasha’s mind refused to believe Sesshoumaru’s dire prediction. He shook his head in denial. “She *has* to remember me . . . Maybe she forgot *you*,” he snarled, eyeing Sesshoumaru through his narrowed gaze. “I’ve tried for years to forget about you . . . but she *couldn’t* have forgotten about me.”

Shippou sat forward, elbows on his knees. “I don’t know how all this happened, InuYasha, but I saw the jewel today.”

His mind was dangerously close to being overwhelmed. InuYasha shook his head again. “She purified it. She had to have. She brought Kikyou back . . .”

“It was dormant,” Shippou clarified. “It looked like cheap glass. Kagome still wears it around her neck.”

InuYasha sighed and shot to his feet. “All right. So the past *did* happen. But something else has changed it? Something that happened after Kagome purified the jewel . . .” He trailed off, staring out the window at the changed world he had chosen. Kagome didn’t remember him? Maybe he just needed to remind her . . . “If I talk to her, if she sees me . . . she’ll remember.”

He missed the knowing look that passed between Sesshoumaru and Shippou as he stalked toward the door. He’d go see her. She’d remember him. Of course she would. She was Kagome, the strongest miko, ever. She couldn’t have forgotten. She promised she’d never leave him . . .

“You can’t, baka, surely you know that. You can’t simply march up to her and remind her. We don’t know what caused her to forget. We have no way of knowing what would happen should she remember. Understand that if you cause the miko to remember her past in a traumatic way, the consequences could be dire, both for you as well as for her.” Sesshoumaru pinned InuYasha with a bored stare. “Do you really want to inflict that much damage on the woman you claim to love?”

InuYasha shook his head, refusing to believe the truth in Sesshoumaru’s contentions. “Why the fuck would you care? You don’t like her, and you sure as hell don’t like me. Kagome needs to remember, and I’ll make sure she does!”

“And if the memories harm her, InuYasha? What will you do then? Will you spend the rest of your life being bitter and angry because you destroyed two women who shared one soul? Or

perhaps you'll wait another five hundred years for their next reincarnation to come around so you can destroy her, too?"

InuYasha flinched at the painful reminder. He wanted to lunge at his brother, to rip him apart with his claws. But he could also see the truth belying Sesshoumaru's words, and no matter what Sesshoumaru's agenda might be, InuYasha couldn't allow himself to do a damn thing that might hurt Kagome. "Keh!" He started forward again. Surely it wouldn't hurt just to see her, though, to make sure that she really was all right?

Sesshoumaru frowned and jerked his head once toward his brother. Shippou made a face. Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes and let them glow red for a moment. Shippou paled just a little then flinched. With a resigned sigh, he said, "InuYasha, there's one more thing."

InuYasha swung around to face the kitsune again. He had been striding toward the door, and neither of the others had to be brilliant to figure out that the hanyou was getting ready to go see Kagome. "I don't have time for this, Shippou." Catching both their frowns, InuYasha rolled his eyes. "I just want to see her, okay? I just want to make sure she's fine. Whatever it is can wait until later."

Shippou shot out of his chair and grabbed InuYasha's arm. "This can't. There's something else I need to tell you before you go charging over there."

InuYasha snorted but did stop, planting his hands on his hips and stabbing Shippou with a baleful glower. "Spit it out, will you?"

Shippou glanced at Sesshoumaru, who rolled his eyes and slowly stood. "Your miko is dating a human named Houjou," Sesshoumaru explained as Shippou high-tailed it away from InuYasha. "She told Shippou today that she's been seeing this boy for the last two years."

It didn't come as a shock to anyone when InuYasha let loose a thunderous howl of frustration. Even still, the windows shook, the walls trembled, and the resonance of shattering crystal clattered up the stairwell and into the room.

Sesshoumaru shook his head slowly. He had warned Kagura and Rin to take the children to the park a couple of blocks away. He had a feeling that his wife was going to have a fit when she got home and found her beautiful collection of crystal animals smashed beyond repair. Sesshoumaru chuckled softly, envisioning the damage that Kagura was likely to visit upon InuYasha for the trespass. Hell hath no fury like Kagura scorned, after all . . .

"I'll rip the bastard apart," InuYasha calmed down long enough to hiss. "Just watch me. I'll leave him in such a mess that it'll make what we did to Naraku look like playtime."

Shippou flinched. Naraku had been left scattered in too many pieces to count. Once Kikyou had retrieved the jewel though, the fragments of Naraku's body had dissolved and had blown away in a cloud of black ashes on the breeze.



## ~Chapter 6~

### ~Restless~

Kagome sighed and blinked in the dark quiet of her bedroom, unable to sleep. Why was she so restless?

She reached up to finger the pink stone on her necklace but frowned as she brushed against the locket Houjou had given her. Carefully she unhooked the gold chain and dropped the offending piece onto the nightstand beside the bed. Why had that locket felt like some sort of collar? Like Houjou was trying to mark her as his territory?

Kagome laughed softly at her strange sensibility but had to admit to herself that it felt much better, being free of Houjou's trinket.

In the darkened corner by her desk sat a huge backpack. Kagome stared at it. Slowly she stood and wandered over to hunker down before the bag. But when she reached out to touch it, she stopped. Why did she feel like there were things in that bag that could hurt her? *'Secrets I don't think I want to hear.'*

With a snort at her own odd thoughts, Kagome shoved that idea aside. It was just a bag—*her* bag. Still, she couldn't bring herself to open it, and instead, she lifted it by the straps and pushed it to the back of her closet.

Kagome glanced at her bed and sighed once more. Why couldn't she sleep? She wandered over to her window and stared at the shrine courtyard bathed in the beautiful blue light of the moon.

Goshinboku. The God Tree. The singular tree that stood in the middle of the yard with a silent majesty that left Kagome in awe. When she was small, she used to climb that tree to sit up as high as she dared. The tree offered her a comforting aura back then. When she was especially sad, like when her father died, Kagome had often sought the comfort the tree offered her. *'Why does it call to me now?'*

A quick flash of crimson and silver flashed through her mind. Only colors, nothing more, and the vaguest scent of something wild, untamed. It could have been a feeling or an emotion. It could have been a memory or a fleeting fancy. It could have been a person or a time. But Kagome couldn't place it.

She growled low in her throat, confusion and irritation warring in her mind. She closed her eyes and lifted her face to intercept the gentle breeze and drew in a deep breath, willing her mind to clear, her thoughts to cleanse themselves.

A gentle smile toyed with the corners of her lips as she opened her eyes and gazed up at the full moon so high in the skies. A wistful thought rose in her heart, a bittersweet yearning to touch the moon . . .

Kagome let her eyes fall once more on Goshinboku and her smile widened. She wanted to climb the tree again, to nestle in the comforting branches and to hear the quiet whispers of the ones who had gone on before. Growing up in the shrine, Kagome had always heard the tales, the stories that her grandfather was so fond of recalling. Everything was mystical, clad in the ancient swell of religion, of magic, to him. How many times had she heard the tale of the nameless young man—half-human, half-youkai—who had been pinned to that very tree for fifty years, only to be released by a very powerful, very mysterious miko?

The name of the hanyou had been lost in the annals of the passing centuries. The name of the miko had, as well, but the romantic lore of the tale held sway in Kagome's mind, and it was one of her favorite stories. The end of the story varied in the telling, though. Some claimed that the hanyou and the miko faded into history together. Others said that the hanyou lost the miko forever, and that he wandered the earth alone, searching for her and mourning her, because he loved her. In her mind, though, in her heart, she thought that maybe they'd just forgotten, and one day they'd both remember. Then they would be together. How could a love that strong, that pure, not have a happy ending?

A slight movement caught her eye, and Kagome frowned and squinted, staring at the riot of spring leaves that shrouded a vague outline in the dark: a vague outline of silver, and then of crimson. She blinked in surprise. It looked like a person, sitting in the topmost branches of the tree.

Kagome stared another moment then backed away from the window, pausing long enough to grab her thin summer robe before running out of her room and down the hallway toward the stairs. The vision called to her heart, whispered to her in hushed tones that she couldn't hear. Pulse pounding in her ears, rushing through her like gale winds, Kagome ran.

Less than two minutes later, Kagome stood at the base of Goshinboku with a marked frown staring up at the empty branches. Had she imagined that she had seen someone up there?

Without a second thought, Kagome grabbed the nearest branches, and hauled herself up. She climbed the tree easily and giggled softly as the beauty of the night swirled over her senses. Lost in the very essence of the unspoiled stillness, Kagome forgot what she thought she had seen and sighed.

A sudden flash, a vague recollection of a dream or a fantasy, she wasn't sure which. She'd known the night. It had been a secret friend to her. Allowing her dreams of what she couldn't remember, yet that night . . . images came and went faster than she could discern them. A man in a black robe; a woman with sad, lonely eyes . . . again the streaking silver and crimson, the tiny child with the brilliant green eyes . . .

She sat high in a tree—not this one, but another; a tree far away, masked in the mists of half-forgotten memories. She sat in that leafless tree in the middle of summer cloaked in crimson arms. They held her steady, unwilling to let her fall. Safe, comfortable, sheltered . . . She glanced down in the memory and saw the hands—human hands. But the hands bore claws, like a cat . . . or a dog. She turned her head to see the man’s face—Yes, definitely a man there beside her . . .

Kagome blinked in surprise then snorted out a dry laugh at her own imagination. She’d never been away from home, and certainly didn’t climb any dead trees. The world around her in the vision had been unspoiled, fresh, so different from the modern Tokyo she knew so well. Maybe she’d read one too many fables. Or perhaps she was getting fanciful in her old age.

Goshinboku whispered to her in the night. She couldn’t understand the words.

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Atop the roof of the shrine, InuYasha huddled in the shadows. Cursing himself for having stooped to this, he couldn’t move away, either. After all was said and done, his damned brother and that double damned kitsune had all but made him swear on his mother’s grave that he wouldn’t upset Kagome, that he wouldn’t remind her who she was or who he was . . . or what she meant to him.

Damn them, anyway. InuYasha stifled a growl low in his throat and dug his claws into the roofing. From where he sat, he could smell Kagome’s scent wafting to him. She’d just bathed not longer than an hour ago. Always he could smell that soap on her, that foreign floral scent that veiled the baser scent of her. After her baths he tried to avoid going anywhere near her. The scent of those flowers on her warm skin was enough to send his senses into a whirl of heady pleasure that bordered on frustrated longing. How often had he wanted to draw her close, to hold her next to his heart so tightly that she would know what she meant to him, how much she meant to him? He had never done it. He really wished he had.

He sighed softly. She was so close and yet he dared not go to her. As it was, he had to jump out of the second story window of his bedroom at Sesshoumaru’s mausoleum he called home. Every time he had gotten near the front door, he’d been caught and duly reprimanded.

Ears flattening against his skull, InuYasha had to stifle his growl of frustration. Kagura had been livid when she’d gotten home and discovered that InuYasha had unwittingly shattered her collection of crystal animals. Shippou—the ass—had barely been able to hide his own amusement as InuYasha had sat there, dumbstruck, while Kagura brought the roof down on his head with her ranting and raving about his inability to control his temper. He had to admit, however grudgingly, that he was glad that Kagura hadn’t had her fan at the time. She was mad enough that she likely would have sent her Dance of Blades at him.

Sesshoumaru, at least, had looked a little sympathetic. InuYasha had been grateful for that, until his bastard of a brother laughed and muttered something about being glad that it was someone else on the receiving end of Kagura's formidable ire.

It was hard to understand, he had to admit. He was used to things he could touch, taste, smell. The implications of Kagome's memory loss were harder to deal with. That the jewel was now dormant and had been purified, as Shippou said, was confusing enough but something that InuYasha could accept. He, himself, knew what Kagome had wished. The low growl that escaped his throat couldn't be helped. Why had she done that? Why had she wished Kikyou back? Hadn't Kagome known that the only reason he had been upset that day, after Naraku was defeated, as Kikyou was lifted into the sky by her Shini-dama-chuu was because he mourned his inability to say goodbye to her for the second time?

"Damn it, damn it, *damn it!*" he muttered as he dug his claws in deeper, resisting the desire to race over to Kagome and demand an answer. He reached up to touch the prayer beads and remembered with a sick feeling that he no longer had them.

How could she not remember? For two years they had spent all their time together. She'd wheedled out his secrets in that time. She'd taught him how to trust and how to have friends. She showed him how to believe in something greater than himself. She led him to the knowledge that there were beautiful things in the world worth dying for . . . like her.

Kagome.

InuYasha sighed, recalling how she had nearly died. He thought she was dead. Had it not been for Myouga, the flea demon, she would have died. It was one of the few times that InuYasha could remember being truly thankful for the oftentimes useless retainer.

He couldn't remember the first time he had realized how precious Kagome was to him. Now he realized that he'd taken for granted that she would always be there. She'd promised, after all. She'd given her word. He thought that she had known how much he relied on her. He thought that she had known what his feelings were. How could she not? Even Sango and that pervert Miroku had known. Why hadn't Kagome?

He sighed as the girl in question lifted her face heavenward, eyes closed, her chest expanding as she breathed so deeply. Again his heart hurt, and he winced as a splinter of roofing slid way up under his claw, piercing his flesh. He dug his claws in more, and the splinter wedged in even deeper. The scent of his own blood hit him hard, and he dragged in the heady scent, savoring it in a wholly primitive, entirely primal, way.

Minutes passed—or were they hours—as he kept his vigil. Kagome made no move to return to the house. She leaned to the side, letting her temple rest against the rough bark. Goshinboku cradled her as InuYasha could only watch. The tree mocked him, taunted him in the ancient language that InuYasha barely recognized. The arch of her neck glowed blue in the wan light of the full moon, and InuYasha breathed deep. The scent of wildflowers had subsided. Instead he smelled the richness of her balmy skin, so pale in the darkness. The shocking wave of rampant

lust hit him hard. He groaned softly, digging in his claws again, repressing the overwhelming desire to go to her. She shined brighter than the Shikon no Tama in a cool blue aura of the night that radiated her miko power. If she forgot about him, had she also forgotten about that?

If the past had happened, and the jewel had been purified, why didn't Kagome remember? And why didn't anyone else remember? How was it that Shippou swore that Kagome hadn't missed even a day of school? Shippou had chosen to be a teacher in hopes that he could cover up Kagome's mysterious absences. But it hadn't been needed. Why?

Leaning back against the attic wall behind him, InuYasha moved Tetsusaiga away from his side and wrapped his arms around the weapon, idly stroking the sword as he continued to stare at Kagome. He could feel his eyes glowing. If she looked his way, would she see them? He willed her to remember, desperately prayed to every god, every entity that he knew or could make up. He wanted to see that smile she reserved just for him, just one last time.

A subtle shift in her scent drew him upright. InuYasha frowned. Kagome hadn't moved at all since she leaned against the tree. But the scent that came to him now moved him forward out of the shadows as he quietly leaped down and then up into Goshinboku. It was a scent that he knew only too well after two years.

She slept.

"Kagome," he murmured softly, leaning forward to breathe in her scent. His nose nearly touched her hair. Luckily, though, after spending so much time with her, he also knew that once sleeping, not much outside of a minor act of the gods would wake her, either.

He settled back on the branch and carefully pulled Kagome into his arms, settling her head against his chest. Common sense told him that he should take her back to her room. But after his tumultuous day, InuYasha didn't quite have it inside him, to relinquish his hold on her yet.

He wrapped his arms around her, the long arms of his haori serving as a blanket for her. She sighed happily in her sleep and snuggled closer to him. A low growl escaped him, and he blinked almost guiltily as he glanced down at the sleeping girl in his arms. She didn't even flinch.

InuYasha held her close until the damp chill of the predawn air permeated his senses. In a couple of hours it would be daylight, and Kagome would be waking up for real. There was no help for it, he supposed as he stifled the urge to sigh and gathered her into his arms. He lit on the ground and quickly jumped again, landing neatly on the ledge outside her window. Thanking his luck that she had left it open, InuYasha carefully maneuvered her through the opening.

She didn't stir as he laid her on her bed and dragged her covers up to her chin. He cocked his head to the side and smiled slightly as he watched her expression. Then he sank down on the floor beside the bed and folded his hands together on the coverlet, letting his chin fall onto them as he watched over her. He'd done this every night. In the two years that they'd been near constant companions, it had become second nature to him, to watch over her, to protect her, first as the miko who guarded the Shikon no Tama, and later . . . to protect the woman instead.



~Chapter 7~  
~The Substitute~

Kagome dropped down in the grass beside her friends with a heavy sigh and dug into her bag to retrieve her lunch. Her friends were already there and were whispering and giggling. They didn't seem to notice Kagome's arrival, and Kagome pushed away the unsettling thought that she somehow didn't belong there with them.

"What are you guys talking about?" Kagome asked, raising her voice to be heard over Ayumi's giggles.

Ayumi grabbed Kagome's arm and turned to her, eyes sparkling with excitement. "Didn't you hear? Mrs. Takumi broke her leg chasing down a soccer ball earlier! She's out for the rest of the year!"

Kagome looked aghast. Mrs. Takumi was the girls' physical education teacher, and that was their next class of the day. "That's awful!" she gasped, genuinely shocked at her friends' humor over the unfortunate accident.

Eri waved off Kagome's concern. "No, it's *wonderful!* You haven't seen the substitute teacher!"

Kagome made a face and shoved her lunch box back into her bag. Somehow she'd lost her appetite when her friends had started their chatter over the teacher's unfortunate injuries. "I can't believe you guys," she complained. "Mrs. Takumi is really nice, and besides that, what could possibly be so great about a substitute?"

Yuka squealed. "You'll see," she gushed. "He's . . . *there* . . ."

Kagome turned to see why her friends were behaving so bizarrely. Her eyes found him immediately. Tall though not overly tall, the substitute looked very young, hardly old enough to be a teacher. He wore a loose crimson colored sweatshirt and black warm up pants that hid his body from view but somehow Kagome knew that he had a very real physical strength. She felt an insane draw on her body, like she needed to be near him. She didn't move.

What surprised her most was his longer than waist-length white-silver hair that was caught back at the nape of his neck with what looked like a black leather strap. He moved with an innate sort of grace, a deliberate agility. His head slowly turned, as if he could feel her watching him, and she gasped as liquid golden eyes locked with hers. Those eyes were the color of a candle flame lit from behind with flecks of light. *'Lava,'* Kagome thought absently, *'flowing over me . . . He's going to burn me . . .'*

Then he smiled almost shyly. Kagome could feel her face explode in hot flames, and yet she couldn't force her eyes away to save her soul. Had she ever seen anyone who looked quite like him before? She swallowed hard. She had a feeling she never would, again, either . . .

"He's *staring* at you, Kagome," Yuka whispered into her ear with a shrill giggle.

"His name is Mr. Izayoi," Eri added. "He's Mrs. Inutaisho's brother-in-law, I heard."

Kagome vaguely heard her friends' words. Mrs. Inutaisho was the school's head mistress. Her husband, Sesshoumaru Inutaisho, was one of the wealthiest men in Japan, if not in all of Asia. He ran a software conglomerate.

Curiously, the substitute teacher didn't take his eyes off her as he continued moving along the path, which was why he ran smack into another of the teachers. Kagome gasped and shot to her feet as both teachers crashed to the ground. Incredibly, Mr. Izayoi was able to roll at the last second and therefore took the brunt of the fall as the middle-aged geometry teacher landed on his chest.

Kagome didn't think. She swiped up her backpack and ran forward to extend her hand to the young teacher, momentarily surprised to find that he looked even younger up close. His cheeks were tinged red in embarrassment, and he pointedly ignored the hand Kagome had offered as he hopped up in one fluid movement, once more exhibiting that extraordinary grace she had sensed.

"Are you all right?" Kagome asked, concern furrowing her brow as she stared at the man.

He ignored her question and looked at the geometry marm instead. "Sorry," he bit out, his tone almost accusing. The teacher assured him that she was all right before hurrying away. He finally turned those amber eyes on her once more. Kagome shifted uncomfortably as a hot little spark ignited in her belly. The instant heat there seemed to drain any other warmth from her limbs as her arms and legs went curiously numb. "Shouldn't you be in class, Kagome?"

Kagome was sidetracked from her discomfort by his question. "How do you know my name?"

She missed the odd flush that darkened on his cheeks. "Kagura must've told me about you."

"Kagura?"

He made a sound that reminded Kagome of an animal's growl. "My brother's mate—err, *married* to Mrs. Inutaisho."

She frowned at the odd way he'd said that. But she shrugged it off, falling into step beside him as they headed toward the school again. "I don't think I've seen you around here before."

"Yeah, it took awhile to get here."

Laughing softly at the way he'd worded it, Kagome hitched her bag up on her shoulder as he held the door open for her. "Will you be substituting the whole time that Mrs. Takumi is recovering?"

He shrugged. She could still feel his eyes on her. "I guess. She'll be out the rest of the year."

"I'm in your class next," Kagome explained as she walked next to him, trying to hide the ridiculous smile at the very idea of seeing Mr. Izayoi every day for the next eight weeks. Her hands were sweating, and her heart hammering wildly against her ribcage. He shot her a strangely knowing look that she intercepted as she lifted her hand to flutter over her chest. *'Trying to hold in my heart? And why does it seem like he knows what I'm feeling?'* She smiled at her own fanciful thoughts. "You're kind of young to be a teacher, aren't you?"

He faltered in his stride but she didn't seem to notice. "Yeah? I finished school early. Home schooled . . ."

Kagome hitched up her bag again and sighed softly. Curiously enough, that pronounced discomfort of her first impressions had all but disappeared as they continued onward. It was comfortable, to walk beside him. She felt like she knew him. She frowned. That was a strange thought.

They reached the hallway that led to the changing rooms. Kagome made an awkward hand gesture toward the left and forced a dim smile. "Guess I'd better change for class," she offered brightly.

Mr. Izayoi blinked a few times, like he didn't understand what she was talking about then reddened slightly. "Oh . . . yeah . . . all right."

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He watched her go, her back blanketed in the glossy black hair that he loved. InuYasha sighed. Something had to be wrong in the great cosmic alliance, or surely he'd irritated one of the many gods in the universe. Why else couldn't Kagome recognize him? She loved him. He *knew* she did. You couldn't just forget someone you loved, could you?

He sighed, a most dejected look stealing over his features. Apparently, *she* could. Damn.

Sesshoumaru derived far too much joy when he'd sat InuYasha down a few days ago and had explained that he'd taken the liberty of arranging a few things that InuYasha would need. Most of the papers in the manila envelope that Sesshoumaru had dropped in his lap were uninteresting. A couple, though, had intrigued him. First off, it seemed that InuYasha Izayoi really did exist. He'd been born nearly twenty years ago, if the paper that he'd stared at had meant anything at all. It had surprised him that Sesshoumaru had honored InuYasha's mother in such a way as to give InuYasha her name for his surname.

There were some bank account books, a few small plastic things, and a land title deed. Interesting, he had to admit. According to the paper, he still owned InuYasha's Forest—*his* forest . . . and the Higurashi shrine, too, since it was on forest lands.

“What are these?” InuYasha asked grudgingly as he sniffed at the small plastic cards. They didn't smell like much of anything, really, and he had no idea what they were for.

Sesshoumaru chuckled and plucked the cards from InuYasha's hands—he was getting ready to chew on the corner of the one marked `Visa'—only to drop them onto the table. “They're credit cards. If you eat them, you can't use them. Don't worry. You can use them like money, so long as the store accepts those cards. The bills for such go to the family's accountant. You don't have to worry about paying them. Just take care not to buy a car or anything, will you?”

InuYasha frowned at Sesshoumaru's dry tone but remained silent. He picked up another paper that looked to be some sort of certificate and frowned as he stared at it. “Physical education?” he read with a scowl. “What's this?”

Sesshoumaru pushed his wire rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose and took the paper that InuYasha extended toward him. “Hmm. You're a teacher, it says. Physical education instructor, to be exact. Not much training but a bit of brawn . . . Should be right up your alley, so to speak.”

InuYasha let the deliberate slur pass. “You mean like *games*?” he asked, his tone taking on a condescending air. “You've got to be kidding.”

Sesshoumaru didn't raise his head. But his eyes lifted to stare over the top of the glasses frame. “You couldn't very well be a computer engineer. What else would you rather do?”

InuYasha refrained from comment as he continued to rifle through the stack of papers. “I own a *house*?” he muttered with a distinct snort.

Sesshoumaru shrugged. “Do you really think you're living here with me?” He affected a shudder and made a face. “I think not.”

“Keh. Why didn't you tell me sooner?” he questioned.

“Because you needed to stay here while you became better acquainted with this era,” Sesshoumaru explained in a tone that suggested that InuYasha was being childish. “And until I have your vow that you will not do anything to jar the miko's memory.”

“Why? Why are you and that runt-fox so concerned with Kagome's memory?” InuYasha asked. It wasn't the first time that they had made allusions to the idea that they thought restoring Kagome's memories could be detrimental.

Sesshoumaru sank down in the chair next to InuYasha and crossed his ankles as he sat back. In a tone that suggested that InuYasha should have already known the reason for the concern, he said,

“Because we don’t know what caused her memory loss. Restoring her memories might cause more harm than good, especially if it is done in such a way that it is traumatic for her.”

As much as InuYasha wanted Kagome to remember him, he had to concede to Sesshoumaru’s reasoning. The very last thing he wanted to do was to cause Kagome any pain. With a heavy sigh, InuYasha nodded slowly. “Fine. I won’t tell her anything, for her sake, and her sake only.” He leveled a glower at Sesshoumaru. “For the record, I’d better not find out you’re trying to keep me from her for any other reasons,” he warned.

“What other reasons would there be, baka?” Sesshoumaru countered mildly.

“Well, gee, I dunno, Sesshoumaru. What reasons did you *ever* have for making my life a living, breathing hell?” InuYasha asked sarcastically, lifting an eyebrow in silent challenge.

Sesshoumaru just chuckled.

Leaning forward, InuYasha snatched the glasses off Sesshoumaru’s face and squinted as he raised them to his own eyes. “What are these for?”

Sesshoumaru retrieved them and slipped them back into place. “Because, you idiot. Dogs, by nature, don’t have very good eyesight, and youkai are no different.”

InuYasha snorted in response. “Keh! There’s nothing wrong with my vision.”

“Then thank your human mother for that,” Sesshoumaru remarked dryly as he shook out a newspaper and proceeded to disappear behind it.

Surprise made InuYasha blink a few times. It was the first time he’d ever heard his arrogant brother say anything even remotely close to nice about any human, let alone InuYasha’s mother. It hadn’t been the first time, however, that InuYasha had noticed how much Sesshoumaru had changed during the last five hundred years. The other Sesshoumaru was easy to figure out. All InuYasha had to do was draw his sword and whack at him a few times. This Sesshoumaru, though, was almost . . . *nice*.

“Anyway, Kagura called this morning. It seems the girls’ physical education teacher has, unfortunately, broken her leg. She wants you at the school as soon as you can get there.”

“What for?” InuYasha asked as he stuffed a sausage link into his mouth whole.

Sesshoumaru didn’t reappear from behind the newspaper. “So you can go to work . . . ignorant half-breed.”

“Where’s this school, bastard?” InuYasha asked as he stowed another sausage. Sesshoumaru made a face at his brother’s perceived lack of manners.

“In all the times that you visited the miko’s era you don’t know where her school is?”



## ~Chapter 8~

### ~Modern Perils~

“This is terrific, Mrs. Higurashi,” Houjou said for the fifteenth time since they had sat down to eat. Mrs. Higurashi smiled warmly. Kagome ignored the comment.

She’d been trying to break it off with Houjou when her mother had unceremoniously invited him to dinner. That just figured. Kagome stifled a sigh. The last couple of weeks had convinced her more than ever that she didn’t really want to be with Houjou. Trouble was, she didn’t want to hurt him, either. *‘After we eat,’* she assured herself. *‘I’ll tell him as soon as we’re finished . . .’*

“We’ll have a guest after dinner.”

Kagome swallowed the food in her mouth and frowned as she stared at her mother. Something in the way that Mrs. Higurashi had made that statement sounded odd. She frowned and set her chopsticks aside. “Who?”

Her mother kept her eyes downcast and Kagome could discern the slightest hint of pink on her mother’s cheeks. What was going on? “Actually, he’s coming to see you. Well, to *teach* you.”

“Teach me?” Kagome echoed as she lifted the fragrant tea to her lips. “What do you mean?”

Mrs. Higurashi sighed and pushed her food aside to concentrate on her daughter’s face. “As you know, there’s been a rash of muggings lately. It’s been all over the news. Now, normally I wouldn’t worry so much, but you do love your freedom, and I don’t want to seem harsh by taking it away from you—”

It all made sense. Kagome sighed. The muggings her mother was talking about had been all over the news. What troubled her mother most, though, was that the criminals tended to target young women, and seven of the twelve incidences had happened fairly close to the shrine. Her mother probably thought that Kagome was walking around with a giant bull’s-eye on her back.

“Mama—”

“Hear me out, sweetie. I’m not going to make you stay home. But I did call and make arrangements to have a tutor for you. He’ll be here soon, and he’s going to teach you basic self-defense. That way I can feel better whenever you walk out that door.”

So it wasn’t as bad as Kagome had feared. She wasn’t going to be confined to the shrine, and learning self-defense may come in useful. She acquiesced easily enough and smiled. “Oh. That’s fine, then.”

“Who did you get to teach my Kagome?” Houjou asked.

Kagome gritted her teeth. She hated it, how possessive Houjou was starting to sound. On the way home from school earlier, he had even told a few of his friends to stop teasing ‘his woman’. She wanted to slap him for it. Something about those words really grated on her nerves . . .

He hadn’t always been that way. She didn’t know what had happened to the normally shy, always sweet, generous boy she’d started dating just after she turned fifteen. There hadn’t been any real signs that he was changing. Almost as though he was one person one day and a whole different person the next, Kagome had to wonder what had sparked the change. ‘*Maybe he’s possessed,*’ her mind joked. She smiled to herself. ‘*Or maybe he’s taken a crash course: How to be Possessive 101 . . .*’

Kagome shook herself mentally and shifted her waning attention back on her mother’s words. “I called the school and asked for a reference. Luckily, Mrs. Inutaisho was in, and even luckier still, she had the man in her office right then; the substitute teacher—a Mr. Izayoi. Have you met him?”

Kagome nearly choked on her tea. As it was, Houjou reached over and began thumping on her back with the heel of his hand so roughly that Kagome lifted her elbow to shove him back and glared at him. She’d be lucky if she wasn’t black and blue in from his ‘concern’. “I’m fine,” she rasped out, wiping her mouth on her napkin and shoving herself away from the table.

Souta’s eyes widened, and he grinned. “Mr. Izayoi?” he echoed enthusiastically. “He’s cool! He came in yesterday and told our class the story of the Shikon no Tama!”

“It *isn’t* just a story,” Grandpa complained. “It happened, I tell you! There was a hanyou pinned to Goshinboku! *Our* Goshinboku!”

Souta waved a hand to shut the old man up. “Sure, Gramps! Anyway, Mr. Izayoi really knows his history! The way he described the whole thing was almost as though he had been there! It was really cool!”

Kagome grinned as she started water to wash the dishes. Souta was still raving about Mr. Izayoi’s storytelling abilities as she scraped the plates and cleared the table.

Mr. Izayoi.

He was fascinating. After their initial meeting, Kagome had thought of the teacher often, and much to her own discomfort. That odd feeling that there was something familiar about the man hadn’t lessened. If anything, it had intensified.

It was the unsettling way he stared at her, like he knew her secrets, her innermost desires. Heat stole up her cheeks at that thought. She didn’t want to admit to herself what those innermost desires were. It was something that she wasn’t ready to admit to herself, let alone to anyone else.

The strange feelings that came over her when she was around him, though . . . they frightened her and yet thrilled her at the same time.

They were currently studying basic gymnastics in physical education class, and Kagome hadn't been overly surprised at how incredibly flexible the teacher was. The natural grace she had sensed from the man had been proven correct. When he'd demonstrated balance on the beam yesterday, the other girls in the class had broken into twitters and giggles as he had made a show of hopping around only to catch himself on the thin beam. Kagome had just stared, mute.

Later she had tried to work on the balance beam. She'd stumbled. He had caught her, and something in his eyes had brought to life a stuttering warmth as sensation so beautiful had welled up deep inside her. "Be careful, Kagome. If you slip when I'm not watching, I may not be able to catch you."

Heart lodged in her throat, breath gasping and uneven, it registered in her mind that he didn't let go of her right away. Then he seemed to realize where he was, what he was doing, and his hands had dropped away. "Th—thank you."

He stared at her in that same disquieting way, a slight smile twitching the corners of his lips. "Stay off that until your heart slows down. I wouldn't want you to fall again."

She watched him turn and saunter away. It had taken a long time to get her pulse to comply.

*"What is it about that man?"* she asked herself for the millionth time since she had met him. Why did she keep catching him staring at her like he was willing her to remember something? That sad look in his gaze spoke to her heart, tugged at her memory but never made sense. Kagome shook her head. She had to be imagining things. Still . . .

"Kagome, dear, don't worry about the dishes. I'll take care of them," her mother said as she put her hands on Kagome's shoulders. "You'd better get changed. I doubt you want to do your first lesson in a skirt."

Kagome glanced down at herself. She hadn't changed out of her school uniform, and her mother was right. As she started out of the kitchen, Houjou fell into step behind her. Kagome sighed softly. She had to get rid of him, too . . .

He veered off toward the living room to wait for her, and Kagome caught his elbow. His smile was in place as he turned to face her, and almost instantly, he caught her in his arms. Kagome stifled another sigh.

"Houjou, we have to talk," she said, forestalling him as he leaned forward to kiss her.

"Talk later," he commented as he leaned in to nuzzle her cheek. Kagome pulled away gently but firmly.

“I . . .” she trailed off then drew a deep breath. *‘Just get it over with, you weenie,’* she chided herself. *‘Yeah . . .’*

Houjou reached over and smoothed a lock of hair out of her face, tucking it behind her ear. “You have the world’s most adorable ears, Kagome,” he commented with a grin.

Kagome made a face and stabbed Houjou with a marked frown. “I don’t want to see you anymore,” she blurted out quickly, face reddening with every word. She steeled herself against whatever show of emotion Houjou would deal her.

To her surprise, Houjou laughed. “You’re my woman, Kagome. Of course you’ll see me.”

Kagome’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and she backed away a few steps in retreat. “Listen to me, Houjou—”

He sauntered toward her, stalking her slowly. She retreated more. “Admit it, Kagome: you’re meant to be with me. You know it. I know it. You’re my . . . *mate.*”

The word *‘mate’* shocked her enough that she pushed Houjou back before she planted her hands on her hips, glowering up at him. “I’m not your *‘mate’*,” she pointed out. “And I’m not your *‘woman’*, either!” With a deep breath, Kagome gripped her temples between her hands, rubbing furiously. “You need to leave.”

Houjou sighed melodramatically but did turn to leave. He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and faced Kagome one last time, a strangely cunning grin gracing his expression. “I’ll leave for now, but I’ll be back to claim you soon enough.”

The fool actually had the nerve to wink at her before he stepped out of the house. Kagome stared daggers at the door as it closed before finally turning on her heel and stomping up the stairs. As satisfying as it was to hear her feet shake the floor, it did nothing to assuage her irritation as she tore out of her school uniform and dragged on a pair of cut off sweatpants and a tee shirt.

Why did she have the feeling that Houjou wasn’t going to give up that easily? Deep, sparkling, laughing blue eyes danced before her. She blinked in surprise. What was that? Houjou had brown eyes. Why was she seeing blue?

*‘Baka!’* her mind fumed as she viciously dragged her brush through her hair. Pulling the length up into a pony tail, Kagome winced when her own vindictive thoughts made her pull her hair a little too tightly. *‘Why can’t he be normal and just let it go?’*

With a growl of frustration, Kagome stomped out of her bedroom and back downstairs.

“Did Houjou go home already?” Mama asked as Kagome stepped into the living room.

Kagome made a face. “He left. I . . . I told him I don’t want to see him anymore.”

Her mother didn't look surprised. Kagome didn't have time to wonder about that, though, because the doorbell distracted her.

"Why don't you answer that, dear? It's probably Mr. Izayoi."

Kagome hurried to the door and opened it. Mr. Izayoi stood there, arms crossed, tapping his index finger against his arm with a scowl on his face. His silvery hair was tied back, and he wore a short sleeved white dress shirt and jeans. She blinked in surprise but stepped back to let him inside. "You're awfully overdressed, aren't you?" she commented as he dropped his arms and stepped past her.

"Keh. Don't worry about me. It doesn't matter what I'm wearing. You *can't* hurt me," he pointed out. Then he glanced at her and frowned. "You look like you just rolled out of bed."

She flushed at his derogatory assessment. "I was told you were coming to give me self-defense lessons. If you were going to take me on a date, I'd have dressed for that, instead," she pointed out. Her eyes flared at what she'd just implied. Instant heat filled her cheeks, and Kagome swung around to hide her embarrassment. He laughed softly behind her. She lifted her chin proudly and led him toward the living room. "Mama, this is Mr. Izayoi," she said, jerking her head to indicate the teacher behind her.

Mrs. Higurashi stood up and smiled warmly, extending her hand to the teacher. "Mr. Izayoi, it's a pleasure to meet you. Would you care for a drink?"

Kagome frowned. Her mother wasn't acting like this was a lesson. She was acting like Mr. Izayoi had come to visit.

"InuYasha's fine," the teacher said, his voice almost embarrassed. Kagome turned to eye the man.

"InuYasha? Doesn't that mean dog—?"

InuYasha flushed slightly and turned away. "My parents had a weird sense of humor," he muttered.

Kagome nodded slowly. Mrs. Higurashi hurried out of the room just as Souta came tearing around the corner, nearly running straight into InuYasha. "Mr. Izayoi! This is so cool! Can you tell me more about the legend of the Shikon no Tama?"

InuYasha shot Kagome a quick, startled look. Kagome narrowed her eyes, wondering why he would do that. "Not now, kid. Beat it," he said.

"Don't talk to Souta like that!" Kagome blurted out before she could stop herself. Then she flushed.

InuYasha blinked in wonder at her outburst. Her embarrassment quickly turned into confusion when the man grinned. Specks of gold burst in his eyes, lighting the amber depths and making them glow. It was Kagome's turn to blink in surprise.

Mrs. Higurashi interrupted the odd moment as she returned with two bottles of water. She handed one to each of them and gestured toward the glass doors that led to the courtyard behind the house. "Grandpa set up practice mats out back for you two. I thought it'd be best to practice out there. The house isn't really large enough inside."

InuYasha was the first to respond to Mrs. Higurashi's words. He nodded curtly and stalked over to the doors. Kagome shook herself mentally and followed, noticing as she did so how well InuYasha's jeans hugged his hips and legs.

As if he could read her thoughts, he turned on her the second the door closed behind her. "Stop that, bi—Kagome!" he growled.

"What were you going to call me?" she demanded.

He snorted and stalked toward Goshinboku. "Nothing. Sorry."

Her eyes narrowed slightly on his trim back. She knew what he was going to say, and he didn't sound sorry at all. "I'm starting to think this was a bad idea," she commented but followed him.

"Look, I said I was sorry," he growled. "Why do you always have to chew everything to death?"

"What do you mean, chew everything to death? I don't chew—"

"Keh!" he cut her off. "You do. You *always* do. You *always* have, and you probably *always* will. Damn, why do you have to do this every time we—?"

"What are you talking about?"

He glared at her another moment. "As if you didn't know." He stopped short and sighed. "Forget it."

Kagome shook her head slowly and made a face. "You're exhausting."

She stopped when he dropped onto the ground. That he had hunkered down so quickly didn't surprise her nearly as much as the way he was sitting. Knees spread shoulder distance apart and knuckles resting on the ground between his feet, he looked almost like a dog, sitting there. Kagome knelt before him, hands on her knees as she peered into his face.

He looked as though he was remembering something. His expression was a little shell-shocked, and Kagome had to wonder what could have made him look like that. "Are you okay? Mr. Izayoi?"



## ~Chapter 9~

### ~Legend of the Shikon no Tama~

InuYasha rolled over onto his back and sighed then flinched. He had known that these self-defense lessons were a bad idea. Damn Kagura, anyway. She thought it would be good, that it would help to get Kagome to remember him. How stupid he was for thinking that Kagura might be right. No, the only thing these lessons were accomplishing was dealing him a good deal of soreness since he had to let Kagome toss him around while she learned to defend herself, not to mention other undesirable side effects when she would end up straddling him, as she had mere minutes ago . . . He groaned. He really, really ought to deal a world of hurt on the house of Sesshoumaru. That bastard brother of his was probably laughing his ass off at InuYasha's expense . . .

The only thing he was thankful for was that, for the duration of the lessons, Kagome always wore sweatpants or jogging pants. He knew from past experiences what it was like, to see, to touch, to have those bare thighs of hers stretched over him. As if her scent wasn't enough of an opponent for him, when she wore that damn school uniform of hers, there hadn't been a thing to mask or mute that, not from him.

With a soft groan, InuYasha sat up. If he didn't redirect his thoughts really quickly, he'd probably leap at her when she came back, and how would he explain that? He shook his head slowly. *'Damned if I do, and damned if I don't. I swear I'll fucking die.'*

For three weeks now he'd been letting Kagome chuck him around, and other than that first night when she had said that she thought she knew him from a past life, she didn't seem to remember him at all. He was starting to wonder if she ever would . . .

He growled low in his throat. She didn't *need* to learn to defend herself, damn it. She *knew* how to defend herself. More to the point, he was her protector, her defender. It was a task he had taken on long ago. It was a task he hadn't ever wanted to give up. Yet he wanted to be near her. Near enough to see her, to hear her sigh, to see her smile . . . *'Kagome.'*

Kagome stepped out of the house with two water bottles. She threw one to him. He caught it easily and made quick work of draining half of it.

In the cool shade of Goshinboku, Kagome flopped down beside him as they enjoyed the break in their training. InuYasha spared her a sidelong glance but flushed when he intercepted her own stare. Her eyes could make him feel a thousand emotions, could bring him to his knees, no questions asked.

He'd hidden his feelings during their two year odyssey. In that time, in that place, telling her how he felt would have complicated things. It was best to leave it as it had been. *Friends*, but how many times did he show her his feelings? Why didn't she understand that whatever he did, it was always for her? She was his world. She just didn't know it.

He dared another glance at her. She was still gazing at him. "What?" he demanded. She stared at him like she wanted to ask him something but wasn't sure how to do it.

She smiled. Her eyes lit up and glittered in the spring sunshine. He'd given up his Sunday to come by and give Kagome a lesson. His alternative was to sit alone in his empty house and drive himself crazy, wondering what Kagome was doing. It had been a no-brainer.

"Souta told me before about this story you told his class once. My grandfather told us the story, too, but Souta said your version was much better."

InuYasha frowned. The story he'd told Souta's class? About the Shikon no Tama? Did Kagome want to hear it? More to the point, could he tell her the story without jogging her memories too badly?

"I guess you could say that I've researched it really well," he commented, trying to hedge the subject and trying to avoid saying anything that might remind her.

Kagome's grin widened. "Can you tell it to me, too?"

He shifted uncomfortably. To be honest, he hadn't wanted to tell the story the first time. Kagura had insisted that it would be therapeutic. Then she had warned him that the names had all been lost over the years. The story itself didn't bother him anymore. He'd made peace with all of that, but Kagome . . .

The recollection of the well filled with water, the consuming fear that she was lost to him; the faces of their friends, trying not to cry as they bore witness to his last moments in the Warring States Era . . . Closing his eyes against the memories, he cleared his throat and said, "It's a long story. We're supposed to be training."

Kagome looked away then suddenly brightened. She got up and grabbed his hands, dragging him to his feet. InuYasha grimaced as his shoes pinched his feet. So long as he lived, he would hate the damn things . . . "What are you doing?" he growled. "Where do you think you're dragging me off to?"

Kagome giggled at his surly tone but didn't stop walking and didn't let go of his hands. "We can go for a jog. That way we're still training. Now talk. I want to hear this fantastic story."

InuYasha sighed, trying to figure out where to begin. "It all started with a priestess. She was given this special jewel to protect. It wasn't just any jewel. It was called the Shikon no Tama, and it was said to possess the soul of a great priestess and the demons she tried to destroy."

Kagome let go of his hands and broke into a jog. InuYasha sped up into a loping run to catch up with her. She glanced over her shoulder and her smirk widened when she noticed that he was closing in on her. He couldn't help but grin back. Something about Kagome's smile had always been and always would be infectious to him.

"What happened to this priestess?" Kagome asked without breaking her stride and without a sign of fatigue. "She's not the one who broke the jewel, right?"

"No, no. She didn't break the jewel . . . that was a different . . . priestess." InuYasha winced. Of course, if Kagome couldn't remember then she wouldn't recall Kikyō. Still . . . even though he had gotten to say his goodbyes to her at last, the dull ache was still there, and he imagined it always would remain. A sudden swell of anger shot forth, spurred on by the knowledge that things weren't supposed to be this way. Kagome wasn't supposed to have forgotten him. *'Damn her! What has she done? And how can I ever undo it?'*

"InuYasha?"

Her voice broke through his reverie, and he forced a smile after intercepting her concerned look. "She died," he said flatly. Emotions braced against the pain of the disclosure, his voice had taken a harder edge, a note of matter-of-fact. Trying to give Kagome the meat-and-bones of the story without the knowledge that she had been there . . . InuYasha wasn't sure if he could do it. "She was fooled into thinking that the man she loved betrayed her so she pinned him to a tree, and she died."

Kagome suddenly stopped jogging and whirled to face him. An odd sort of pain clouded her features, and InuYasha stepped back in retreat. "She was beautiful, this priestess, wasn't she?"

InuYasha frowned at the look on Kagome's face. Was she remembering? And if she was, how much of it would she recall? But Kagome turned away, her eyes focusing on something that InuYasha couldn't see. Her voice settled into a quiet murmur, and InuYasha didn't dare speak for fear of breaking her trance. "That priestess . . . killed the hanyō, but she loved him, too . . . and he loved her." Kagome frowned suddenly and swung around to face him once more. Her gaze slowly cleared, and she stared at him, challenged him, dared him to lie to her. "There was another priestess, wasn't there? Only she came later . . ."

InuYasha felt his chest constrict under her close scrutiny. "There was," he admitted softly, hoping . . . did she remember? Did she? Could she?

Kagome's face clouded over as tears sprang to her eyes but didn't fall. "She loved him, too. She saved him . . . but he still loved the first priestess."

InuYasha flinched at the sadness in her tone, the sorrow in her eyes. He had caused that. Of all the terrible things he'd ever done in his life, this one thing, this emotion in Kagome's eyes . . . was the worst. She'd come to him no more than a child, really, and in her struggles to reach her own maturity, she had changed him forever. Somehow, he had let her down in the worst way. How on earth would he ever tell her that he was sorry for that? How would he convince her that

he didn't mean what she thought he had meant? How would he prove to her that he'd wander alone until the end of time, if only she would give him that special smile once more?

Kagome shook herself out of her reverie and stepped closer to InuYasha. She reached out and touched his arm, her brow furrowed as she stared at him with concern. "You look like you lost your best friend," she said softly, her tone light, as though she was trying to tease him.

He nearly groaned at how deadly accurate her observation really was. He wrinkled his nose and snorted. "Keh. I've never been one to have friends."

Kagome grinned. "I'm your friend." She suddenly flushed then looked away before hurrying on, "Well, I'm your student, too . . . I guess it isn't appropriate to say I'm your friend."

*'Damn it,'* he thought with a glower as he reigned in the perverse desire to shred something with his claws. *'She still doesn't remember . . .'*

"Anyway," Kagome hurried on, her tone falsely bright, her scent shifting as her nervousness intensified. He couldn't see her face fully but he could see the pink tinge in her cheeks. "Forget I said that."

He caught her hand and swung her around to face him, his eyes blazing with an intensity that he didn't try to hide from her. "You don't understand . . . I don't *deserve* a friend like you."

A deeper flush blossomed over Kagome's face. She opened her mouth to speak but snapped it closed again and swallowed hard instead. He leaned toward her slowly, his gaze falling to her lips. Her heart thundered in his ears . . . or was that his own? The only thought that made sense in his mind was that she was here, in his arms, and he desperately wanted to kiss her. Her pulse tattooed his fingertips, a wild creature, a phantom entity. Her blood singed through her veins, untamed, calling to him as he leaned in a little bit more. Mere breaths separating them, only the pounding of her heart in his ears to guide him. Desperation, a wanton yearning for something he'd reminded himself way too often that he couldn't have ebbed and flowed over him. He pulled her a little closer.

Then she closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. "*Osuwari!*" she shrieked.

InuYasha blinked in surprise and let go of her hand. It registered just after that he hadn't ended up in submission, and his temper soared. He reacted without thinking. "What the hell do you think you're doing, bitch?"

Kagome's flush paled and she suddenly sank down on the ground. "I . . . I don't know . . . I don't know why I said that . . ." Then it registered, what he had just called her, and she pinned him with a glare. "I'm not a . . . *InuYasha!*"

"Keh!" he snorted and turned away. He hadn't meant to call her that. He was afraid to look at her now. The Kagome he knew would have either ignored the name or would have sat him. Since the

latter obviously wouldn't work anymore, he wasn't positive what to expect. This Kagome . . . he wasn't sure what she'd do.

He certainly wasn't expecting what she did do, though. Kagome threw her head back and laughed. The sound of her amusement echoed around them and soothed his nerves like nothing else in the world could. He couldn't help but laugh softly with her as he hunkered down on the ground next to her. "Why are you laughing?" he finally asked.

She shook her head and managed to get her giggling under control. Waving a hand before her face like she was overheated, she grinned unrepentantly at him. "I guess . . . I deserved it," she admitted with another soft giggle. "I don't know why I yelled that at you. You're certainly not a dog. I'm sorry."

InuYasha's smile faltered slightly. He knew why she yelled that. He just couldn't tell her. Oddly enough, he wasn't sure if he was more upset that she knew to use that word or because that word hadn't worked. What had she done with the necklace? If he described it to her, would she know what he was talking about? Or had that, like so many other things, been forgotten, as well?

After a rather depressed sigh, InuYasha stood up and offered Kagome his hand. She stared at it a moment before taking the help he offered. "You ready to go back?" he asked.

Kagome sighed. "I guess so. It's just peaceful out here, isn't it?"

He followed the direction of her gaze skyward and grinned. He knew what she meant. In the middle of the forest—his forest—were the last remaining traces of the time he knew so well. He supposed that when Sesshoumaru had attained the land, he had left it this way on purpose. That his brother would do something like that was something that thoroughly confused him, but it didn't stop him from being grateful, either.

Kagome let her head fall back and closed her eyes. InuYasha looked away. The blatantly submissive signal had to be coincidental on her part. He only wished it wasn't, and he had to fight his instincts to accept her gesture. *Yeah, InuYasha. While you're at it, why don't you forget to breathe?*

The smile was back on her face when she dropped her chin again, though. Suddenly, she frowned and blinked quickly. "What?" he asked. She was staring at him in a completely unsettling way, almost as though he had somehow changed before her very eyes. The color drained from her face, her eyes widened, darkened, deepened. What had she seen?

She shook her head quickly and forced a laugh. It was too loud and too shrill to be natural. InuYasha's ears flattened against his head to block the sound. "Oh, nothing," she remarked a little too brightly, waving her hand in a noticeably nervous gesture. "It was stupid."

"Stupid', how?" he echoed, painfully aware of another conversation they had before that had started out in much the same way.



## ~~Chapter 10~~

### ~Dog Ears?~

Kagome had nearly reached the God Tree when InuYasha caught up with her. It surprised her that he was able to do that. She'd had quite the head start. As it was, he tackled her and bore her to the ground. She grunted in pain as the air whooshed out of her body, and he rolled, dragging her with him. When they stopped, she was still under him; bodies tangled together, legs entwined. Her breathing was shallow, gasping, harsh.

"What the hell's gotten into you?" he growled.

She blinked back the injury-induced tears that filled her eyes. She was pretty sure her entire body was going to be black and blue in the morning. When he'd caught her, he had been running full-out. Something was unusual about his temper, though, but Kagome couldn't place what it could have been. Almost as though he thought she ought to know better than to have fled from him, the look with which he pinned her spoke volumes. "Get off of me," she demanded, pushing at his shoulders. He didn't budge.

"Tell me what spooked you back there, and I'll think about getting up," he challenged, his tone oddly soft despite the fierceness in his glower.

Kagome pushed at him again then groaned in frustration when he still wouldn't move. "It was stupid, I told you," she grumbled, giving up for the moment on freeing herself. She let her arms drop on the ground and concentrated instead on breathing since his position left her gasping for breath. He was a lot heavier than he looked, and being this close to him and in this intimate of a position was having a marked impact on her senses. Then it hit her. That's what was so odd. Angry? Yes. Frustrated? Certainly. Confused? Perhaps, but . . . "Why aren't you winded?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes on him.

InuYasha made a face, and judging from his expression, he was close to losing whatever control he had left. "You answer me first, bitch. Why'd you take off like hell's seven hounds were after you?"

She racked her addled brain as she tried to think of a way to avoid answering his question, but he was too heavy, too intimidating, too certain, and far, far too close. She could feel the heat of his body radiating off him straight to her, and she gulped for air again. The lack of air stemmed more from his proximity, his breath brushing over her cheek like a caress, than from his crushing weight. Sudden heat swirled in her belly. Every inch of his body felt as though it wanted to flow into her, to merge them together. The emotion shocked her, terrified her, and thrilled her at the same time.

“Answer me, or I swear I’m not fucking moving.” To emphasize his point, InuYasha pressed against her more. Kagome gasped at the contact as she racked her brain for the cause of the entire situation. Then she remembered, and she groaned.

She stifled a panicked whimper. *‘There is no help for it,’* Kagome thought darkly. She had to tell him, as much as she didn’t want to. It was stupid. It was infeasible. And when she’d blinked and looked again, it had to have been her imagination because they weren’t there. “I thought you had dog ears on top of your head,” she admitted, refusing to look him in the eye and unable to keep the irritation out of her voice that he’d managed to unsettle her enough to make her tell him anything. “Cute little white dog ears. I *told* you it was stupid. Are you happy now?”

He suddenly stopped moving. In fact, it seemed like he had suddenly stopped breathing, too, but he stared at her, his eyes willing her to understand his unstated words. Kagome swallowed hard. His gaze shifted down to the pulse in her throat.

*‘He’s going to kiss me,’* Kagome thought wildly. The look that entered his expression as he stared down at her was the same one that she had seen on his face in the forest, just before she’d yelled ‘osuwari!’ at him.

Trouble was, same as before, Kagome didn’t think she’d mind at all, if he did kiss her. In fact, somewhere deep down, she had to admit that she wanted him to do it. Those secret dreams, those desires she was too frightened to voice—they shot to the fore with a delirious abandon, swirled around her center, calling out to him. She willed him to listen, to hear what her heart sang every fluctuation of her pulse. Creating a rhythm that lacked any structure, and all she could do was cling to his shoulders, willing him closer, closer, to kiss her, so she could touch the moon . . .

His head dipped lower, his lips poised just above hers. She could feel complete heat radiating from his mouth to her skin. Kagome couldn’t even summon the resistance to push him back. Why did the idea of kissing this man feel so right?

Eyes fluttering closed, eyelashes brushing over his cheeks in a soft wave, Kagome opened her mouth to protest but the sound lodged in her parched throat. *‘Stop fighting, Kagome . . . he wants this as badly as you do.’* Lips almost touching, the end of his ponytail trailing over his shoulder, tickling the hollows of her throat . . .

“Kagome? Your mom said you were out here, and—”

Kagome gasped as the familiar voice cut through her bemusement. The moment shattered like glass, cutting into her soul with a vicious abandon. She groaned softly and renewed her struggle to escape the prison of InuYasha’s body.

InuYasha took a moment longer to come to his senses. She didn’t miss his frustrated sigh, nor did she fail to notice the flash of pain in his eyes. *‘Pain? Why would he feel that?’* she wondered. Her thoughts were cut short when he shot to his feet, dragging Kagome by the hands, he growled savagely but turned to face the intruder.

Kagome flinched and tried to hide behind InuYasha. It wasn't difficult. He pushed her behind his back and continued to growl low in his throat. Of all the people to find her in that position, why did it have to be Houjou? Kagome stifled a groan and covered her face in her hands.

"What's going on?" Houjou asked, slowly stalking toward the two. InuYasha turned, careful to keep Kagome behind him, as though she was in some sort of danger. His growl didn't stop.

"What do you want?" he countered.

Kagome lifted her face from her hands at the almost predatory sound of InuYasha's voice. She couldn't see his face. A flash of red raced through her mind. *Crimson with a violent streak; a serrated silhouette on flesh. What?* She was drawn out of her thoughts when InuYasha pushed her further behind him. She stumbled and caught herself on the back of his sweatshirt. He either didn't notice or didn't care.

"I came to see *my* woman," Houjou insisted as he tried to come closer again. InuYasha backed her up a bit more. "Kagome?"

"Don't talk to her," InuYasha growled. "Talk to me!"

Houjou stopped suddenly and stared at InuYasha as though it was the first time he had noticed that he stood between himself and Kagome. "You're that substitute teacher, aren't you?" he challenged. "Mr. Izayoi? Isn't it a breach of contract, for you to become involved with a student?"

Kagome gasped softly when InuYasha spoke again. A strange gruffness had entered his tone; a savage intensity that she'd never heard before yet was somehow familiar to her. "I don't give a damn about a fucking contract. Get out of here, Kouga, before I cut you up and leave you for the scavenging vermin."

Houjou stopped short, sidetracked by InuYasha's words. Kagome, herself, leaned to the side to better see his face. "Kouga?" Houjou echoed.

InuYasha blinked, like he was surprised, but only for a moment before his sneer returned. "My mistake. You're much weaker than that bastard ever was."

Deciding to ignore InuYasha in favor of seeing Kagome, Houjou leaned to the side to look at the girl in question. "Kagome, come on. I'm taking you to the movies."

Kagome bristled and tried to step around InuYasha. He caught her wrist in a surprisingly gentle grip and pulled her back again. She shot him an irritated look but remained silent otherwise. Figuring that InuYasha was the lesser of the two evils, Kagome stood on tip toe to glower over at Houjou. "I told you. I don't want to see you anymore, and I'm *not* your woman!"

Houjou shot her a ‘You-don’t-know-what-you’re-saying’ look. Kagome’s glower darkened even more. When he took another step toward InuYasha, the silver-haired man’s growl grew louder. He lifted a hand to reach for Kagome but must have thought better of it. Kagome craned her neck around to see what was going on. InuYasha’s lips were drawn back in an odd grimace but the low rumbling growl that escaped him was what had stopped Houjou’s hand.

“Come on, Kagome,” Houjou said without taking his eyes off InuYasha.

Kagome opened her mouth to retort. InuYasha was faster. “You really need to listen to her, runt. You can’t claim her. She’s not yours.”

That he said it in such a deadly quiet voice sent a shiver down Kagome’s spine. Houjou retreated a step. “Kagome?”

She refused to come out from behind InuYasha. Actually, she highly doubted that he would allow her to, anyway. His hand was resting on her hip in silent warning to stay where she was, and Kagome was too apprehensive to disobey. “You need to leave, Houjou,” she said in a tired voice.

Houjou’s temper flared, obviously believing that InuYasha was to blame. With remarkable speed, he shot forward and caught Kagome’s wrist, dragging her away from InuYasha. InuYasha retaliated by wrapping an arm around her waist. Kagome grimaced as the men tugged at her, and she wondered if she would ever escape in one piece.

She whimpered softly. InuYasha either heard her or sensed that she was hurting and immediately relinquished his hold. Houjou caught her and steadied her against his chest. She jerked away from him and stepped back, directly into InuYasha’s chest. Houjou stepped forward. Kagome squeaked as she realized that she was now sandwiched between the two and they looked as though they were about to rip one another to ribbons.

“Back off, bastard, or I’ll have to shred you,” InuYasha growled.

“I’d like to see you try! Kagome is *my* woman! I love her!”

“Nobody talks down to Kagome like that, with me around! How dare you humiliate her! *She’s not your property!*”

Kagome had heard enough. With stubborn determination, she put a hand on each man’s chest and shoved them apart. It was comical, the way the two stepped back and stared down at her as though they had both forgotten that she was there, in the first place. She pinned each of them with a glower. “Go home, Houjou. I told you already that I don’t want to see you anymore.” Then she turned to face InuYasha. A bit of her irritation melted away as she stared up at him. He looked like he wanted to tear Houjou limb from limb yet there was something beneath that, too, an aching pain that haunted his eyes; a pain she wanted to take from him. She narrowed her eyes at him just for a second then sighed in defeat.



## ~Chapter 11~

### ~New Moon~

InuYasha stifled the urge to growl as he glared across the table at Sesshoumaru. The older of the two stood up and stalked across the floor without sparing as much as a glance at his brother. After a long silence, he turned on his heel and leveled a speculative look at the hanyou. “Are you really that stupid, InuYasha?” he asked, breaking the stilted silence. “I mean, I used to credit you with at least a modicum of intelligence, but after this, I may have to change that opinion.”

InuYasha flopped back against the high chair back and sighed. “I didn’t plan it, damn it. It just fucking happened.”

“Do you have any idea how much damage you could have done?” Sesshoumaru demanded.

“Yeah, I do: none, because nothing happened!”

“Except that the human boy saw you lying on top of her then decided to tell Kagura about the incident. You’re right. Nothing at all . . .”

InuYasha had the grace to flush at that reminder. “I told you how that happened.”

Sesshoumaru dropped back into the chair across from him and steepled his fingers together, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “They prosecute teachers who can’t keep their hands off their students nowadays,” he pointed out.

“Keh!” InuYasha snorted, stubbornly crossing his arms over his chest. “I never wanted to be a teacher. That was your fucking stupid idea.”

“Be that as it may, it is a moot point now. You are a teacher. The miko’s teacher . . . and don’t forget your promise.”

InuYasha dug his claws into the pristine table top. Sesshoumaru stared at the new scratches, but didn’t comment otherwise. “How can I forget that when you and Shippou remind me all day, every day?”

Sesshoumaru sighed. “Just remember.”

InuYasha stood up quickly and headed for the doorway. “Do you think I’d intentionally do anything to hurt her?” he hissed quietly as he paused in the doorway. “If you do, then you’re damn stupid.”

Sesshoumaru didn't say anything else as InuYasha stomped out of the dining room. A few seconds later, he heard the front door slam. He shook his head slowly. That fool of a brother of his was going to get himself into real trouble, if he wasn't more careful.

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Kagome wandered through the woods without a destination in mind. *'Soothing, to be out here,'* Kagome thought with a smile. She knew this place. It spoke to her heart. It comforted her.

Oddly, though, being in the forest reminded her of InuYasha. After their last sojourn into the trees, he had behaved as though that day hadn't happened at all. She sighed softly. If she were completely honest with herself, she'd have to admit that she had been berating her childish fear that he would think she was too clumsy and awkward at kissing . . . and if she were even more honest with herself, she'd have to admit that she wished he would try it again.

A soft flush crept over her skin. Kagome lifted the back of her hand to her cheek. The warmth of her skin permeated her flesh. She smiled. Too often in her dreams she saw those amber eyes, their silent entreaty. There had been something there, something that, at the time, she hadn't understood. Later, though, she knew. His eyes . . . he'd been asking her something. If she could only figure out what it was that he wanted from her . . .

With a sigh, Kagome flopped down at the base of a thick tree and wrapped her arms around her raised knees. Why couldn't she stop thinking about InuYasha? He was her teacher. She shouldn't feel like that toward him. So why was it that she felt as though she'd known him for such a long time? *'You shouldn't feel that way, but you do. You know you do. He knows you do. You're as transparent as a window, Kagome. Way to wear your heart on your sleeve.'*

"Kagome?"

Kagome blinked in surprise as she lifted her eyes to lock with InuYasha's. He knelt beside her, his head bent to the side. His hair was loose, and she smiled as the wind tossed it around his shoulders. There was something completely familiar about the way his hair was tossed by the breeze. That didn't make any sense, though. It was the first time she could remember him not having his hair tied back. She grinned slightly. She liked his hair free like that. It suited him. "What are you doing out here?"

"I went for a walk, is all," she replied, still staring at him. Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. Her mouth was suddenly very dry.

"It's dangerous for you to be out alone," he remarked, his expression gentle even with the serious undertone.

“What are you doing out here?” she echoed back at him, deliberately ignoring the lure of him. He drew her without realizing it. Or did he know?

He didn't smile, but his amber eyes took on an amused glow. “I live here.”

“You own this forest?” A sudden thought dawned on her, and she frowned in concentration. “Then you own the shrine, too?”

He nodded slowly. “Does that bother you?”

She grinned. “Nope. I never really knew who owned it. Guess I just never asked.” A sudden scowl crossed her features. “Aren't you a little young to own the forest and shrine?”

He shrugged and looked away. “Call it an inheritance,” he remarked vaguely.

“I'm trespassing, then, aren't I?” she teased.

InuYasha looked confused. Kagome scampered to her feet and stepped past InuYasha. She felt her skirt brush his face. She didn't see him flinch and didn't hear him groan softly as one of his hands reached down to steady himself. The other balled into a tight fist.

She did catch the odd look on his face, though, when she turned to stare at him. Her smile faltered, and she bent down to gaze at him. She pushed his hair out of his face. He leaned into her touch. Kagome froze. It almost seemed as though he was nuzzling her hand. A low sound came from him, and Kagome leaned in closer to listen. Eyes closed with a slight smile, he was . . . growling? Yet it wasn't really a growl; more of a contented rumble . . .

As she stared at him, her hand frozen in place on his cheek, she noticed something else, as well. The little white ears that she had convinced herself that she hadn't seen were back, and this time when she blinked quickly, they remained. Slowly, as if in a trance, she reached up with her free hand and touched one.

With a startled yelp, InuYasha shot to his feet and jumped back. “What the hell?” he blurted out, his expression a mixture of confused irritation and embarrassment.

Kagome sank back on her heels, hands dropping to her knees, but she didn't stand. The ears seemed to have vanished once more, and she could only stare in bewilderment at the agitated man before her. “I saw them again,” she said softly, her voice unnaturally calm. She didn't know why the sight of the ears hadn't bothered her this time. She only knew that she liked them. They suited him. “Why do you have dog ears?”

He flinched and looked away. She saw his cheeks pink up. He shot her a quick look, like he didn't think she'd believe his explanation, but he sighed and said, “I'm a hanyou. I'm half inu-youkai.”

She digested that for a moment in silence. “Why can't I see them all the time?”

“You weren’t supposed to see them at all.”

Kagome blinked in surprise as she stared at him. Slowly, the ears reemerged on his head. He grimaced, and she noticed something else. He had fangs? And when her gaze dropped to his hands, she saw . . . claws. “I . . . InuYasha?”

He didn’t move toward her. He didn’t answer her. She could sense his anxiety. Did he think that she would be frightened of him, or that she would be appalled by what he was? Slowly Kagome stood and closed the distance between them. She reached out carefully. He didn’t move away as her fingers brushed his ears then returned, only to rub gently as his rumbles started once more. His eyes drifted closed as hers did, and they stood still as she played with his ears. Soft, warm, deliciously fuzzy, something about those ears endeared him to her even more. The feel of her attentions seemed to soothe him as his rumbling soothed her. Something so perfect passed between them, something that would remain untouched inside her mind forever.

He brought his hands up to rest on her hips. Above the coarse material of the waistband, his claws grazed her skin softly, gently. Liquid heat exploded in her, the nearly overwhelming desire to collapse against him. Set ablaze deep inside, the feelings that he inspired in her with a simple touch both electrified her and alarmed her at the same time. She stepped back with a smothered gasp as her face shot up in flames.

Neither spoke for several long minutes nor would either of them look at the other. InuYasha finally broke the silence by clearing his throat. Kagome studied the ground below her feet. “Let me walk you home,” he offered at last.

Kagome said nothing, but fell in step beside him.

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InuYasha watched with a frown as Kagome disappeared into the shrine before leaping to the top of Goshinboku. Out of habit, he folded his arms together even though he couldn’t reach his hands up his sleeves. ‘*What did any of it mean?*’ he asked himself for the hundredth time since he had offered to see Kagome home. If she could see him in his true form, why was it that she still didn’t remember him?

Her fragrance wafted to him on the breeze, and InuYasha closed his eyes with a soft groan. The memory of Kagome’s touch on his ears was enough to make his senses spin out of control. With a frustrated moan, he let his head drop back, vaguely relieved that the tree trunk was behind him to catch him before he fell. What was it about Kagome that could completely disarm him?

She filled his senses, befuddled his mind, filled his dreams with agonizing images of the girl and the woman she’d become. He couldn’t reconcile himself to the constant state of torment, the physical pain of being near her, the mental ache of being away from her, too. If he had the

choice, he'd rather go up against a few thousand youkai than to have to deal with the unrequited lust that was near to driving him mad. At least he'd be able to assuage some of the consuming tension that threatened to devour him completely.

Kagome opened the door and called out goodbye to her mother.

InuYasha drew a ragged breath and opened his eyes. '*Pathetic!*' he berated himself with a scowl as he hopped out of the tree and took off at a sprint, hopping on buildings to keep her in view. It was a joke, really. She didn't need self-defense lessons. InuYasha didn't want to teach her how to protect herself. He wanted to be the one to do that protecting for her, after all.

He trailed Kagome to the movie theater and crossed the street to a small outdoor café. Kagome was with a couple of her girl friends. She was safe enough. He ordered a soda and sat down to wait.

-=-=-=-=-=-

Kagome stepped out of the theater with Eri, Yuka, and Ayumi by her side, listening as the girls performed a replay of their favorite scene in the movie. Truthfully Kagome hadn't paid attention to more than a few minutes of the film. She'd been too busy thinking about InuYasha.

Hanyou . . . Why hadn't that statement surprised her? Kagome remembered the feel of his fuzzy ears and grinned to herself. She muttered her goodbye to her friends and headed toward the shrine.

She had no business thinking about the teacher, she reprimanded herself sternly. He was only her teacher, nothing more. No matter what she imagined, there was no way that he was really interested in her. Right? Her step quickened with her turbulent thoughts. '*Wishful thinking . . . He's a grown man, and you're just a silly girl with a little crush.*' She sighed. '*Alright. A huge crush.*' She smirked at the irony of her thoughts. '*Yeah, a crush the size of a mountain, and if I don't nip it at the bud, that mountain was going to end up crushing me.*'

Kagome paused on the pedestrian overpass that crossed over the main thoroughfare. Staring down at the cars passing along below, she sighed. Things had become a little too complicated.

People jostled against Kagome. She squeezed herself closer to the railing, but didn't move. A sudden bump, though, and Kagome nearly fell over the side. Her scream was cut off by a strong arm around her chest, and she found herself pulled back away from the edge and impending danger.

Her guardian angel set her back on her feet. She turned to look at him. He was a good deal taller than she was. His black hair was long and flowing. But he stared at her with such hostility that she stepped back in retreat before she could make herself speak. "Th—thank you," she stammered, flustered by the intensity behind his fathomless dark eyes. He didn't answer right



## ~Chapter 12~

### ~Camping~

Eri giggled and pulled on Kagome's arm as the two fell behind Ayumi and Yuka. The path was barely wide enough for one. But Eri insisted on making Kagome lag behind as she turned to face her with a calculating look.

"What?"

"What's going on between you and Mr. Izayoi?"

Kagome flushed. "I don't know what you're talking about," Kagome remarked innocently.

"You're a terrible liar, Kagome."

"Nothing's going on," she insisted again.

As though to thwart her statement, the aforementioned Mr. Izayoi stepped up behind them. He was carrying a very large pack with most of the supplies for their camping trip, and he stared at the girls with a raised eyebrow. "Something wrong, girls?" he asked pointedly as he reshoouldered his burden.

Kagome forced a smile and grabbed Eri's arm to hurry her forward. "Nothing at all, Mr. Izayoi," she called back over her shoulder.

"Why are you blushing?" Eri pressed.

Kagome felt her cheeks warm even more. "I'm not."

Eri's look was telling.

They were on a class trip, camping out for the next three days. That they were using InuYasha's forest was interesting. He had apparently volunteered to chaperone, along with Mr. Kissune and Mrs. Inutaisho.

"Hey, Kagome. How's *my* woman today?"

Kagome stifled grimace and shot Houjou a dark look. "I'm fine, and I'm not your woman," she replied.

He chuckled softly and draped his arm around Kagome's neck. "You don't have to play hard to get. You know how I feel about you."

Shrugging off his arm, she counted to twenty-five before she dared to speak. "I'm sorry, Houjou. I'm not interested."

Houjou's eyes narrowed as he stopped and grabbed Kagome's arm, pulling her around to face him. She stared back in defiance but didn't speak. Finally, Houjou nodded, as though he understood. "It's that guy, isn't it?" he demanded, jerking his head once in InuYasha's direction. Kagome's eyes shifted to the side and then back again. "You've got a crush on Izayoi."

Kagome didn't answer. She turned and stomped away to catch up with her friends.

Houjou. She growled low and then sighed. Why couldn't he get it through his thick head, that she just wasn't interested in him? It didn't matter, what her feelings were for InuYasha. In the end, she just didn't want to be with Houjou. He needed to accept that.

"Hurry up, Kagome. You'll be left behind."

Kagome jumped and snapped her head to the side. InuYasha had fallen in step beside her. He shot her a sidelong glance and grinned as a little more color filtered into her cheeks. Her free hand lifted to flutter over her heart. His amusement escalated and his grin widened.

His gaze caught her backpack, and he shook his head slowly. "Did you leave anything at home?"

Her chin proudly raised a notch. "You never know what you'll need when you're camping," she replied stiffly. "And I only brought stuff on the list."

InuYasha snorted as he jerked Kagome's backpack off of her shoulder and slung it over his own, adding the extra weight as though it didn't matter in the least.

Kagome reached over to take the bag back. InuYasha turned enough to sidestep her attempt. "I can manage."

He didn't answer, deliberately ignoring her protests as he moved on. Kagome fell into step beside him as Eri giggled softly. Kagome ignored her friend as she sped up to walk beside InuYasha again. She felt flustered by all of the attention everyone was paying and she said softly, "It's okay InuYasha, I can carry it."

"So can I," he remarked lightly. "It's amazing you can even move under this monstrosity."

"Everyone's looking at us," she tried again.

"They wouldn't be if you weren't making an issue out of it."

Her mouth fell open, and she shot him a chagrined look. “I’m not making an issue out of anything! I only said—”

“That you can carry this yourself, I know. Now will you drop it because I’m not giving it back.”

Kagome stifled a sigh. InuYasha was much too stubborn for his own good. Eri’s giggle escalated.

By the time they reached the clearing, nearly all of her classmates had stopped to shoot her questioning glances. Kagome was sure that her skin would remain permanently flushed. Mercifully, InuYasha let her bag drop from his shoulder. As he walked away, he stared back at her.

Kagome boldly accepted the silent challenge. She wasn’t sure why, but she couldn’t let him win.

After a moment, he turned away—though not before she noticed the way his eyes had taken on an amused sparkle. His soft chuckle drifted back to her. He sounded confident, victorious. Even though he had broken the eye contact first, she had a distinct feeling he had won that battle.

Ayumi squealed and grabbed Kagome’s arm. Her other two friends huddled closer. “What was *that* look about?” Yuka asked, her eyebrows rising in speculation.

“I *knew* it!” Eri hissed in an attempt to keep her voice down. “There *is* something going on between you two!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Kagome snapped a little too loudly. “He’s our teacher! That’s all.”

She didn’t miss the knowing looks that passed between her friends. Kagome stifled the urge to protest. If she did, they’d think there definitely was something going on.

It was true, wasn’t it? He *was* only her teacher. She had to be imagining things that weren’t really there. She shifted her eyes to InuYasha, and saw that his interest had not waned. As though he could feel her gaze, he slowly offered her a visceral smile that barely touched his lips, but lit his golden eyes with such emotion that it wrapped around her more tightly than a firm embrace.

The strange undercurrent in his gaze unsettled her. Kagome could feel the effects of his stare rifle through her with the force of the emotion that she didn’t understand. She knew what it was. She heard from other girls’ hushed conversations, this flood of sentiment that tugged at her, and she knew what it meant. She wanted him, but she *shouldn’t* want him; not like that. He was her *teacher*, she reminded herself again. To him, she was just a girl whose mother paid him to teach her how to defend herself.

His smile widened slightly, as though he could read her mind. Was he toying with her? Or were these things she sensed from him as real as she hoped they were?

Kagome swallowed hard and spun away as she snatched up her backpack and sank down to rummage around for something to distract her wildly beating heart. “You’re blushing, Kagome,” InuYasha rumbled in her ear, his tone low, almost a whisper. It rippled over her with a ferocious tenacity that destroyed her defenses before she could raise them. She gasped in surprise and fell backward as she watched him straighten his back and swagger away. She hadn’t heard him sneak up behind her. Maybe it wasn’t her imagination after all.

It took a few minutes for Kagome to get her heartbeat back to normal. She dragged out the small jug she brought for water and headed off in the direction of the stream. “Kagome! You’ve got to help!” Eri complained as she watched Kagome’s retreat.

Kagome waved a hand over her shoulder in reply. “I’m going to get some water. Then I’ll help.”

Her reflection in the water startled her. She was oddly flushed, feverish, and her eyes were wild. She filled the jug and then splashed her face, appreciating the cool water on her overheated skin.

After drying her face on the hem of her shirt, Kagome spared a moment to stare idly over the dancing surface of the water. It was peaceful, calm.

Reluctant to leave the serenity of the flowing water behind, Kagome sighed and turned back toward the camp. Her classmates were talking and laughing, and if she didn’t want to sleep on the cold, hard ground, she’d better get a move on it. They were supposed to be setting up their tents.

Despite almost perverse resolve not to look for InuYasha, Kagome couldn’t help herself as she scanned the area. She didn’t have to look far to find him. Leaning to the side with Mr. Kissune with his arms crossed over his chest, Kagome felt a deliciously heady shiver race down her spine at the sight of the sinewy muscles that rippled under his skin.

Memories of the night he’d chased her, of his body on hers, washed over her. Immediate color flooded her skin. The feelings that assailed her were the same as the ones that had taken over her body that night. *How does he do that? He’s not even close to me right now!*

Something about him drew her, captured her. Trapped like a deer in the headlights, Kagome couldn’t look away. She kept her feet moving but didn’t notice where she was stepping—until a stabbing pain ripped up her leg. She didn’t realize that she’d stumbled. But she found herself sitting on the ground gripping her ankle and moaning softly as she struggled to keep herself from crying. Holding her breath, Kagome rubbed furiously at the offending appendage.

“Kagome? Are you okay?”

She stifled a groan as InuYasha knelt down beside her. He carefully pulled her foot into his lap and removed her shoe and sock to survey the damage.

Mr. Kissune hunkered down beside InuYasha. He made a face at the already-mottling flesh. “Kami, Miss Higurashi. You certainly did a number on your ankle, didn’t you?”

InuYasha shot the other teacher a dark look, and Kagome's mouth fell open when he reached over and thumped his fist into Mr. Kissune's head.

A fleeting glimpse of another time and place flashed through Kagome's mind. *A crimson blur and a small, furry-looking human . . . The tiny one-- a kitsune? -- wailed pitifully as a huge lump welled on his skull . . .* The image faded, and Kagome frowned. What was *that*?

Before she could question the thought further, she yelped as InuYasha squeezed her ankle. Though he had done so gently enough, the pressure had hurt just the same.

"Do you wish to go home?" Mrs. Inutaisho asked as she leaned over InuYasha's shoulder to assess the injury for herself.

Kagome blinked back the few tears that had formed behind her eyelids because of InuYasha's inspection. "No, I'm fine."

"You're not fine, stupid girl," InuYasha growled as he stared at her ankle. She flinched as he turned it gently.

"I've got a first-aid kit in my backpack," she replied, biting back the slight nausea that threatened.

"I'll get it," Mr. Kissune replied. Kagome pointed at her huge bag. The teacher nodded and hurried over to get it.

"Kagome, what happened?" Houjou asked as he knelt beside her. He wasn't looking at her face, though. Instead, he was staring at InuYasha, who was still feeling around the injury, seemingly oblivious to Houjou's presence. She hissed as he found an extra tender spot and his hand jerked back slightly. Houjou's stare turned into a glower. "Get your hands off of her!"

InuYasha shot Houjou a cursory glance. "Back off," he retorted as he turned his attention back to the swollen ankle and reached for the bag. He gently set Kagome's leg aside and stood. Houjou didn't back down.

"Did you do something to her?" Houjou demanded.

"Are you really that stupid?"

"We all know you're unnaturally concerned about Kagome," Houjou pointed out. "We've all seen it."

InuYasha advanced slowly, hands clenched in tight fists at his sides. He gritted his teeth together. Kagome heard them scrape. "What, exactly, are you implying?"

"Guilty conscience, Mr. Izayoi?"



## ~Chapter 13~

### ~Answered Prayers~

InuYasha felt like ripping the kid's head off. He didn't. But he didn't back down, either.

Kagura stepped between the two and pushed InuYasha back. "Houjou, go check your tent." Houjou glared at InuYasha for another moment before complying. Then she turned to InuYasha. "And don't you have something better to do than standing here trying your hardest to intimidate the students?"

InuYasha's glower switched from Houjou's retreating form to Kagura. "Don't defend the little bastard," he snarled.

Kagura rolled her eyes. "You're so much like your brother it's disgusting."

"Keh! Don't compare me to that—" A soft moan interrupted his tirade, and InuYasha glanced over to the source of it. Then he realized that Kagome was still sitting on the ground in pain, and he immediately dropped back down, dragging the huge backpack with him.

He dug into the huge bag as a sense of déjà vu crashed over him. Fierce memories with the ability to cut him to the quick, InuYasha tried in vain not to remember how often he'd done this before. The bag smelled the same as it had back then, during their travels in search of the shards of the Shikon no Tama. He shifted Kagome's things aside as he searched for the white box that she called a first-aid kit.

He finally found it and pulled it out. His heart skipped a beat. Hooked to the handle of the small plastic box were the sorely missed prayer beads—*his* prayer beads.

He glanced over at the others. They were all talking to Kagome and seemed oblivious to what he was doing. InuYasha tried to put the beads back in the bag. He couldn't. He stared at them, draping through his fingers. They had a pulse of their own, and they whispered to him.

"My beads," he rasped out, letting the box drop from his fingers as he brought the necklace up to study it.

*'They're mine after all,'* he told himself as a vicious pang of guilt assailed him. She didn't have the right to take them, in the first place. And yet . . . and yet he knew, deep down, that she had removed them from him not to hurt him, but to set him free. She just didn't realize at the time that it was a freedom he never wanted.

“Get out of her things!”

InuYasha hadn't heard Houjou come back. He blinked in surprise and turned slowly as he stood, his glower darkening by the second as he eyed the disgruntled young man. He slipped the prayer beads into his pocket. “I was getting her first aid kit out,” he said defensively.

Houjou took another step closer, his mouth twisting into a derisive sneer. “I'll just bet, *Mr. Izayoi*.”

“Step back, Houjou,” InuYasha warned, his voice dropping in pitch. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Kagome's irritated expression. She rolled her eyes in exasperation. He ignored it.

“InuYasha,” Kagura warned as she tried to settle the rapidly rising tempers.

InuYasha didn't back down. Shippou sighed loudly and snatched the white box out of InuYasha's hands.

“Keep your hands off her,” Houjou warned. “I've told you. Kagome is *my* woman now.”

“And I've told you. She's not your property,” InuYasha maintained, his voice dropping lower, softer, and somehow more menacing.

“Stop it, both of you!”

InuYasha turned in time to see Kagome struggle to her feet. She swayed slightly but shot him a cold glower when he reached out to steady her. She winced as she tentatively put some weight on her injury. InuYasha silently cursed himself for adding to her already pained expression.

Eri rushed over and steadied Kagome's arm. Yuka grabbed her other arm. Ayumi stood behind. “Can I have my first aid kit now? I'll wrap my ankle myself.”

Glancing down, InuYasha realized that he wasn't holding the kit anymore. Shippou held out the box. InuYasha snatched it and shot a quick glower at Houjou before pulling Kagome out of her friends' protection. He carefully picked her up and carried her over to a tree stump before setting her back onto her feet.

She flinched and practically fell as she flopped down. “Give me your foot,” he said gently.

Kagome sucked in her breath and lifted the limb. He flinched at the show of pain and offered her an apologetic half-smile as he popped open the case.

He stared at the wrap in his hands and frowned before slowly raising his gaze to lock with hers. She forced a smile which only served to deepen his upset. “This may hurt some,” he explained.

She nodded, her eyes clearing, and she stared at him. It was a look he remembered well—the one that said that she completely trusted him. When was the first time he'd seen that expression on

her face? InuYasha concentrated as he gently wrapped the bandage around the swollen ankle. A slight grin turned the corners of his lips. It was the same one he first noticed in his father's tomb when she had given him Tetsusaiga . . . *`Don't let me down!'*

"You need to be more careful," he remarked as surveyed his handiwork.

"I was preoccupied," she admitted. "Anyway, I think that helps. Thanks."

He paused as he dug around for another roll of gauze. "Are you sure you don't want to go home? I'll be happy to take you back . . ."

Kagome made a face. "No, I like being out here. It's nice."

Glancing up at her, her gaze captured his, locking together two souls who knew each other. *`If her mind forgot me, did her heart forget me, too?'* Staring at each other, InuYasha saw it, deep in her eyes, the knowledge that somewhere inside, her heart did know him . . . If only her mind would remember, too.

"Do you feel up to going on the nature walk?"

InuYasha jumped. Kagura was talking to Kagome. Neither seemed to have noticed his reaction. Kagome assured Kagura that she wanted to go on the walk. InuYasha snorted in response to that. She couldn't walk, let alone hike. Both women turned to eye him. He caught the looks and flushed slightly as he slowly, deliberately, repacked the first aid kit.

"I, uh . . . I'll carry her," he offered, stubbornly willing his face to remain impassive.

Kagome was blushing. She also looked like she was going to argue. Kagura interrupted first. "All right, then. Let me gather everyone together then. Kagome, don't forget your flashlight."

"A-a-a-all right," Kagome stammered. She stared down at her hands, clasped tightly in her lap. InuYasha smiled despite himself. Kagome wasn't that easy to fluster. He got up and put away her first aid kit then retrieved her flashlight. He tossed the small device into the air and caught it as he wandered slowly back to Kagome.

With calculated slowness, InuYasha turned and knelt down before Kagome with his back toward her. "InuYasha?"

He chuckled softly and turned his head to stare over his shoulder at her. "Come on, Kagome. We don't have all day."

She looked as though she wanted to argue with him. Then she caught his teasing look and narrowed her eyes at his silent challenge. He caught her hand over his shoulder and helped her as she fell against him. The familiarity of her resting against his back was enough to send him into a state of near euphoria. It felt as though she had come home. InuYasha wanted to leap into the skies with her, to go without pause until she was laughing, breathless.

He'd done that before, just once. She'd been sad. He hadn't been able to get her to tell him why. But he had scooped her up, settled her on his back, and had raced through the trees and skies until she was in danger of falling off during fits of giggling.

Kagome's grip on him tightened when he started walking, and she gasped softly in his ear. "Don't let me down," she breathed in a whisper.

InuYasha closed his eyes, just for a moment before smiling gently. "I won't, Kagome. I won't."

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InuYasha stepped through the thick trees, careful that none of the low-hanging branches struck Kagome, and smiled wanly at her sharply indrawn breath. It was a beautiful place, he had to admit. In five hundred years, it was hard to believe that this place hadn't seemed to have aged at all.

He walked slowly to the edge of the water and set her down on a large rock. The bittersweet memory of her sitting in the same spot shot through his mind. She was smiling, happy, with tiny Shippou bouncing around on her lap. In the memory, Sango rushed over to offer Kagome a hand up. Miroku grabbed her. In Sango's haste to put distance between the two of them, she had inadvertently knocked Kagome back, straight into the water.

InuYasha flinched and sank down on the riverbank not far from Kagome. The memory remained as hurtful to him now as it had been sweet to him then.

Kagome turned to stare at the horizon with a slight smile as the breeze ruffled her hair with invisible fingers. "I love to watch the sunset," she said quietly.

"I know."

Her head turned. He could feel her gaze on him. "How do you know?"

He shrugged. "I know you, Kagome."

She sighed as her smile widened. "I feel like I've watched a hundred of these with you."

InuYasha couldn't answer. His heart lodged in his throat, or so it seemed, and he felt as though he couldn't breathe. Slowly, he dragged the string of prayer beads out of his pocket and stared down at them.

"What's that?"

He didn't look at her. His heart hammered painfully in his chest as he stared down at the beads, winking in the moonlight, and tightened his grip on them. "It . . . it reminds me of a necklace I used to have."

"Was it special to you?" Kagome asked softly.

InuYasha nodded, his head jerking in time with the wildly unsteady beat of his heart. "It reminds me of . . . of something that I lost . . . something that I loved."

Kagome looked sad. She reached out and touched his hand, then drew back with a gasp. InuYasha caught the look of shock that nudged aside the sadness. It dissipated, leaving behind a scared expression. Her fingers shook as she pulled the beads out of his hand and clutched them to her chest. "They hurt you, didn't they?"

InuYasha blinked in surprise. "What?"

Kagome shook her head. "The beads . . . the ones you used to have . . . they hurt you."

Her intense brown eyes seemed to penetrate his skull as she silently dared him to lie. All the times that she had used the command on him flashed through his mind. Had it hurt? He snorted inwardly at his own thoughts. No, the annoyance of being sat was nothing in comparison with the pain of loss he'd felt when he discovered that she had taken the necklace away. The pain came at him in a flood of waves, harsh as the tide, biting as the wind, as he watched her holding his beads to her chest.

And yet, staring into her face, InuYasha couldn't bring himself to tell her that. As desperately as he wanted her to remember him, to remember *them*, the very idea that it might hurt her . . . it was just too much for him to bear.

He stared at the beads as she clutched them tightly in her hands then forced a smile for her benefit as he reached down to pull her to her feet. She looked like she wanted to say something but remained silent. InuYasha helped her climb onto his back and wrapped his arms around her legs, careful not to jar her injured ankle.

More dear to him than anything in his life had ever been, she was the one person he'd move the heavens and earth for. Making her remember, though, was something that he could not do, not to her. Maybe the nights he spent cradled in the branches of Goshinboku, staring at the stars and reliving memories of days gone by were tempering him, changing him, making him realize and understand the man he was now as well as the boy he'd left in the past. Many of the things he'd come to realize weren't things he was particularly proud of. He'd made a lot of mistakes, hadn't he, but she never, ever was one. She'd given him so much without asking for a single thing. He knew that now.

If only he could find a way to show her . . .

*'Kagome . . . only for you . . .'*



## ~Chapter 14~

### ~Paler Dawn~

Kagome sat on the ground with her back against a stout tree trunk as the pink edges of dawn crept over the horizon. She'd not been able to sleep. Too many fleeting images, too many inane thoughts had assailed her. None of them had been more than a glimpse into something she didn't understand. Her friends were all sleeping soundly. To avoid waking them, she had crawled out of the tent and then hobbled over to the tree that she sat under now.

The dull clunk of the beads in her hand whispered to her. Her gaze dropped to the necklace. InuYasha wanted it. *"It reminds me of . . . of something that I lost . . . something that I loved."*

The vision she had seen, though, had stopped her from letting him take them. *InuYasha, hitting the earth with force enough to make tremors reverberate around him, the beads glowing with a strange power. His sharp hiss of pain as his face smacked into the ground. . .* She shivered. That vision was all too vivid, far too poignant, not to be real. Why had she seen that?

She shook her head at her own thoughts. Something in those beads had the power to hurt him. Yet why did simply staring at them make her sad?

Kagome stretched the beads between her hands and stared at them thoughtfully. Silver and crimson . . . A streak of color and a muffled scream too distorted to discern. Slowly she sat up and dropped the necklace over her head.

Settling back once more, Kagome idly played with the beads as she watched the sun peep over the horizon. Ribbons of color streaked the skies. She'd seen this sunrise before, in a time and in a place that was veiled in her memories. Sitting next to a figure that she couldn't distinguish, the scene was real to her yet just beyond her grasp. Why did she keep seeing these things, whatever they were? Almost as though they were someone's memories, the disconcerting knowledge somewhere deep inside that she really ought to know what the images meant, but why did she see them?

It confused her, things knew but hadn't been taught, the things that she couldn't explain, the questions that always spoke to her, especially in the night. How many times had she awoken with the remnants of her dreams still hanging onto her mind yet stubbornly refusing to let her remember? The hidden knowledge that whispered to her, the eyes that bored into her skull, the husky tones of a man's voice, always the same words, the same plea, *'Remember, Kagome . . . Remember us.'* The voice always sounded like InuYasha . . .

She could feel eyes on her. They probed her mind, beckoned the chronicles she couldn't reach. Her gaze rose slowly. InuYasha sat, cradled in the branches of a tree high above. His stare locked with hers and though he didn't smile, Kagome couldn't help but smile at him.

He stared at her for a minute, his expression inscrutable. Almost as though he was trying to read her mind, he narrowed his gaze as he took on a fierce scowl. Kagome watched as he dropped neatly out of the tree and knelt beside her. "There's a better place to watch the sun rise," he said softly as he pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Kagome didn't hesitate to climb on his back. She held on tight while he leapt into the trees. He held onto her with a firm yet gentle grip, and to her surprise, she wasn't frightened at all. He jumped from branch to branch with the grace of a cat. She hid her smile against his back. Half dog demon? He almost seemed more feline than canine . . .

"Are you all right back there?" he called over his shoulder as he lunged toward another tree.

"Fine," she assured him as she leaned back to get a better view. The world flew past her as InuYasha quickened his pace, and Kagome threw her head back in laughter.

He lit on a strangely familiar tree, and Kagome blinked in surprise as she slid off InuYasha's back to sit on the branch. He sank down next to her, shoulders slumped forward and an incongruously guarded look on his features.

It was the barren tree, the same one she'd seen before in her mind. But she'd never been up in it before. Or had she?

Kagome tilted her head to the side and bent forward to look into his face. "Are you all right? InuYasha?" She reached out to brush his hair back. He caught her wrist and pulled her arm back a little roughly, his eyes shining like jewels in the half-light. She whispered his name again as her heart threatened to explode into a million pieces. Desperation in his scowl, his heart spoke to hers, and she knew the sound of the echoes. Did it matter how long she'd known him when, in her heart, she'd known him forever?

He dragged her forward, his arms circling around her and trapping her beside him. She didn't care. Her cheek rested against his shirt. She could hear the erratic beat of his heart under her ear. He smelled of woods and wind. She closed her eyes and breathed deep. His heartbeat increased. She lifted her hand, settling it between her cheek and his chest, feeling the pulse beat under her fingertips as she smiled in absolute and complete contentment.

"I like this," she admitted in the quiet.

He sighed as his heartbeat slowed with the sound of her voice. It was as though she had the power to offer him solace. The idea was enough to widen her smile. "Kagome . . . you belong right here, with me."

His arms tightened around her. She sighed happily. Something about being with him made her forget about the pain in her ankle. He offered her a sense of security, of well-being. Kagome reveled in the emotions. They were enchanting.

“If I slip, will you catch me?” she asked quietly, craning her head back to look at him.

He chuckled but his arms tightened just a little more. “You won’t, Kagome. I’ll never let you go.”

His words thrilled her. She smiled to herself as she cuddled against his chest again. Was she the only one he’d ever held like this? She deliberately shoved that thought away. She wanted to believe, at least for the moment, that it had always been just InuYasha and her.

“You confuse me,” she mumbled vaguely, a beautiful lethargy slowly seeping over her.

“How is that?”

She shrugged. “You’re all gruff and serious . . . then you bring me up here to watch a sunrise? Who are you, InuYasha? I mean, really, who are you? Why do I feel like I’ve always known you?”

He didn’t answer her. Instead his finger caught under her chin, and he gently raised her face as he stared into her eyes. He stared at her with a tender smile twitching the corners of his lips. Then he pressed his lips to her forehead and pulled her close again.

That odd rumbling growl issued from him again. Kagome relaxed in his arms with a happy sigh, her arms wrapping around his waist in silent acceptance. Her eyes drifted closed as his contented sounds lulled her into a deep sleep high in the boughs of the barren tree.

InuYasha could sense the change in her breathing, the steady shift that signified that Kagome slept. She was nestled in his arms, cradled against his chest. A complete contentment settled on him. InuYasha buried his nose in her hair as he watched the sun rise.

Unable to sleep in the tent with the restless boys, InuYasha had retreated to the sanctity of a tree instead. He wasn’t able to let his guard down. After years of tense awareness, it was hard to relax enough to sleep anywhere, even in the relative safety of this time he chose.

He sighed and grinned at the woman in his arms. Giving in to the desire to kiss her again, InuYasha let his lips linger on her forehead, in her hair. He’d wanted to hold her like this so many nights . . .

Unbeknownst to her, InuYasha spent most nights up in Goshinboku, unable to stay away. She was like a flame, and he was the moth that would flutter precariously at the edges, hoping not to be burned. Some nights, when he was lucky, she would leave her window open. The temptation was too great, and he always found himself inside her room, kneeling beside her bed.

Watching over her as she slept, InuYasha had wondered more than once what it was she saw in her dreams. Those things would bring a vague, secretive smile to her lips, and he would content himself to simply watch over her, as he had done for so long. It had become second nature to him, and he couldn't remember a time when she hadn't been by his side. She made him stronger, pushed him to realize the person he was inside wasn't defined by his human nature or his youkai abilities but by his choices, and though he had failed her time and again, she had always looked at him like he was the greatest being on earth.

There were so many things that he longed to tell her, he thought as he idly lifted the prayer bead necklace and felt the instant comfort they offered him. He wanted them back in the worst way. Maybe it was a little strange. After all, the beads gave Kagome an interesting bit of power over him. In truth, though, after the initial indignation of being harnessed, InuYasha had to admit that he really didn't mind them. He'd gladly let her osuwari him as often as she cared to, if she would only remember those rare quiet moments they'd shared. Those memories gave InuYasha determination when his sometimes faltered. When he doubted that Kagome would ever regain her memories, these were the images that he held on to. She *would* remember. She had to.

He needed her so badly that when he was away from her he felt like he was dying. All the nights he'd sat up to watch over her, the pain in his heart as he had tried time and again to tell her how he felt had been excruciating. In that time and in that place, he hadn't known how to tell her what he knew in his heart was truth. In the end, words had seemed so inadequate, as though words alone were empty, meaningless. He'd meant to show her how he felt. He just wasn't sure where he'd failed in that . . .

He winced. He had failed. He knew it. The proof of it was here, in his arms, and yet somehow just beyond his reach. Her heart might know him, as his did hers, but her mind did not, and that was a huge obstacle. What if she never remembered? What if she never recalled the times he'd saved her, the times he had come in and defended her? What if she never knew how surely she had saved him, even if it was in a wholly different way?

It was unacceptable, damn it. She had to remember him—she had to remember *them*. He'd left behind everything, just to have one chance to be with her. Surely she'd realize that eventually. Surely she'd know . . .

*'I'll never fail you again, Kagome; I swear it . . . Just let me prove it to you. That's all I want . . .'*

She whimpered softly. His grip tightened around her shoulders but he reached up and gently smoothed away the lines furrowing her brow.

"M'roku," she mumbled.

InuYasha froze. "Miroku?" he repeated, his voice barely above a whisper. Was she remembering that perverted monk? And if she was, did she remember anything else, *anyone* else? *'Remember me, Kagome,'* he pleaded. *'Remember us.'*



## ~Chapter 15~

### ~Transformation~

InuYasha shifted his position and frowned as he stared thoughtfully up the chimney. It was filthy. He'd noticed this before. The sun was starting to set, and he made a disgusted face. *'I'll be human again soon,'* he thought as he turned his head in time to avoid receiving a face-full of soot as he poked at a large chunk of built up ash. He had forgotten about the lunar calendar since he was supposed to give Kagome a self-defense lesson until Sesshoumaru had happily reminded him that tonight was the new moon. Damn that brother of his, anyway.

He poked at another clump of soot and turned his head in time to avoid it, too. But the ash hit him full-on, and he sneezed, which only served to unleash another round of dust. He hadn't noticed before, he thought darkly. The overly sensitive nose that helped him track down Naraku in the past was almost a hindrance here, in the modern world. Because of that, his first month had been torturous. So many convoluted scents, so many different aromas . . . It was nearly overwhelming.

The rest of the camping trip had been fairly uneventful. He'd gotten to carry Kagome around, and that, in his opinion, had been the main highlight of the excursion. He loved the way she willingly held onto him, her trust in him, the absolute belief that he would never let her fall. She was right.

He sighed. He knew he'd been looking forward to seeing Kagome today. He just hadn't realized how much until he had to call and cancel. *'Sometimes,'* he thought with a heavy dose of disgust as another lump of soot fell on him, *'I really, really hate being half-human.'* The image of Kagome's smile filtered through his mind, and he grinned. *'Then again . . .'*

The doorbell cut through InuYasha's otherwise dark thoughts, and he rolled to his feet with a grunt. He shook his head to get some of the soot out of his silvery hair and sneezed then sniffled as he opened the door.

Kagome jumped back as he sneezed, a concerned frown furrowing her brow as she cocked her head to the side. She held a huge bag, and she offered him a shy smile. "Nice," she commented, her grin widening. She was staring at his head. He reached up, trying to figure out what she was smiling about and realized it must have been the bandana he'd tied over his ears to keep them from getting sooty. With a flush, he yanked it off. He blinked in mute shock and didn't move.

"When you said you weren't feeling well, Mama asked me to check in on you," Kagome finally said as she lifted the bag in her arms slightly. "Can I come in?"

InuYasha still didn't speak though he moved aside to allow Kagome to pass. "Which way is the kitchen?" she asked with a flinch as InuYasha sneezed again.

He sniffled and pointed past her toward the back of the house. He followed her slowly, cautiously, as she strode purposefully in the direction of the kitchen. "All the windows," Kagome commented in a slightly awe-struck tone as she stared around the spacious house, "it's like you're still outside."

He'd noticed that, himself. Whomever Sesshoumaru had commissioned to build the house had done an excellent job. The kitchen and living room were one huge room with a high loft—his study—that covered most of it. Everything was trimmed in natural wood that matched the floor throughout. Open, airy, and, InuYasha figured, the only house he could imagine living in, the only thing missing in this place was her, Kagome. He watched as she started emptying the bags onto the counter. She belonged here, too.

She set the bag on the counter and started pulling things out. A couple cups of instant ramen noodles, a box of saltine crackers, a two liter bottle of clear soda, and a box of tissues . . .

Then she tossed the empty bag into the trash can and stepped closer to InuYasha who, much to his own chagrin, sneezed yet again. Kagome's cool palm pressed against InuYasha's forehead. He jerked back in surprise. "W-wh-wha-what are you doing?"

Kagome's smile slipped out despite her best effort to restrain it. She put her hand to his face again but this time, he didn't pull back. "You're a little warm. Not bad, though." She stepped away and crossed her arms over her chest. "Why don't you go lie down? I'll fix you some noodles, if you'd like."

"Keh! I'm not sick," he replied with an arrogant snort followed by another sneeze. He was hanyou, for the love of heaven, half-youkai. Youkai did not get sick. Ever. Only weak humans became ill. With an involuntary shudder, he recalled the time that Kagome had gotten really sick. Ill enough that he had taken her to her time willingly, he'd never been so worried for her. The Kagome he'd known then had been a fighter. But when she was sick . . .

He sneezed again, silently cursing the soot that had brought on the bout and shook his head to pop his ears. His head felt miserably thick, and he groaned softly.

Kagome's hands were suddenly wrapped around his right elbow. "Come on," she remarked as she tugged him forward. "You're going to lie down while I get this ready. No arguing."

"I'm a little dirty, if you haven't noticed," he remarked, hands on hips.

She stared at him, a thoughtful frown drawing her eyebrows together. "Why *are* you so filthy? You look like you've been rolling around in a fireplace."

He snorted. "Because I was cleaning that one," he said, jerking his head toward the huge hearth. The movement unsettled more soot, and the soot tickled his nose again, bringing on another round of sneezing. She flinched as he sneezed for the fourth time.

"Do you always clean things when you're sick?" she asked, her tone cautious, almost teasing.

"Keh!" The caustic sound was rather ineffective with the added stuffiness in his nose. He sniffled as she pulled a tissue out of the box and held it out. He took it grudgingly.

Her grin was teasing, gentle. "Why don't you get cleaned up, and I'll make you something for your cold?" she offered.

He nodded. "Fine."

It occurred to InuYasha that Kagome wanted to take care of him as he headed toward his room to find some clean clothes. The idea was one that he liked. Had anyone ever fussed over him before? He sighed. Too depressing to think about, he decided as he marched into the bathroom.

Changing out of the sweatshirt and pants alleviated much of the soot that irritated his nose. Just removing those garments alone was enough to make him feel a little better despite the new bout of sneezing. He dropped the articles into the tan hamper and washed his face before dragging on the clean clothes. He untied the ponytail that held back the length of his hair and shook it out. That, along with the bandana, had saved him from having too much of the debris to deal with. A quick brushing got rid of the rest of the problem. By the time he wandered back to the main room, he was done and feeling much better.

"Finished?" she asked, glancing at him as she poured steaming water into a Styrofoam cup of ramen noodles.

"All cleaned up," he remarked, stifling another sneeze.

Dropping a hand towel onto the counter, Kagome headed toward him and paused only long enough to take his hands. "All right then, let's put you to bed." He grinned secretly and allowed her to lead him toward the hallway. She stopped suddenly, a comical expression of confusion filtering over her features, and she stared around herself with a heavy air of disgust. "Which one's yours?" she finally asked.

He nodded his head once, toward the one door at the end of the passage. She lifted her chin almost defiantly and dragged him forward again.

InuYasha watched in concealed amazement as Kagome tossed back the blankets on the bed he'd never slept in. She plumped up the pillows and stared at her accomplishment with a smile before gesturing at the bed and then at him. "Get in," she demanded in a tone that seemed to be braced for an argument. He nearly laughed. Instead, he did as he was told. Unsettling, it was, how nice it felt, to have her fuss over him. She dragged the covers up to his chin and felt his forehead again.

“I’ll get your ramen,” she explained as she stepped back.

*‘Why does Kagome’s concern make me feel so good?’* he wondered as he watched her retreat. *‘I shouldn’t want to worry her. Still . . . when’s the last time anyone cared enough to worry?’* Making a face, InuYasha deliberately tried to think about something else. That train of thought wouldn’t lead to any good memories, and he knew it. He tossed the covers off and rolled onto his side, propping his head on his arm as he waited impatiently for her to return.

Her footsteps on the hardwood floor were soft, whispering. She was smiling when she stepped back into the room. He reached for the Styrofoam cup but she didn’t hand it over. Carefully she sat on the edge of the bed and drew up her legs beside her as she faced him, stirring the cup with a pair of chopsticks.

“I can feed myself,” he commented more gruffly than he wanted.

Kagome shook her head. “When I was sick, my mom always fed me, even if I was able to do for myself.”

“I’m not a pup,” he grumbled as she extended some noodles on the chopsticks. He let her feed him, though, despite feeling a little stupid. Kagome giggled. He decided that feeling stupid was secondary to the undeniable pleasure of hearing her laugh.

He swallowed hard and grabbed her hand as she held out another bite. The pulse in her wrist quickened under his touch, and her eyes flew to meet his. “Can I . . . Would you mind if I . . . lie in your lap?”

Kagome didn’t answer. She scooted over though and sat back against the pillows that he’d vacated. He lay back down, resting his head in her lap. *‘Remember me, Kagome,’* he willed her. She set the cup aside and frowned thoughtfully as she idly stroked his hair out of his face. His eyes drifted closed, and his low rumbling started again.

“You never finished telling me the story of the Shikon no Tama,” she remarked quietly.

His eyes opened to fasten on hers. “What do you want to know about it? I thought your grandfather told you the story already.”

Kagome shook her head slowly. “He has, but . . . when you tell it, I can see it, like I was there . . . with you.” She giggled self-consciously, a light blush creeping over her cheeks. “That sounds stupid, doesn’t it?”

He shook his head quickly. “It doesn’t. Maybe we were there, together . . . in a different life.”

Her smile spread to light her eyes, and she idly toyed with one of his ears. “So . . . will you tell me more?”

InuYasha sighed and forced his mind off of what she was doing. It was too nice, the feel of her fingers playing with his ear. “About what?”

“What happened to the priestess?”

Mind still clouded by her methodical fingers, it took a moment for InuYasha to comprehend her question. “Which one?”

“The first one.”

He sighed. He hated this part of the story. Hesitantly, softly, as though he was unsure if he should tell her anything at all, he began, “A man who wanted the jewel made a deal with youkai. He merged with them to create this being that was neither human nor youkai, and he made himself look like the hanyou. In the hanyou’s form, he struck down the priestess and stole the jewel. Then to complete the deception, the being took on the priestess’ form and shot arrows at the hanyou.” He stopped, drawing a deep breath as the memories came back to him with a vengeance.

Kagome gasped softly. Whether she could feel the pain the memories caused him or if she just reacted on the idea that someone could do something like that, he wasn’t sure. Her anger came through in her voice, indignant rage on behalf of the lovers in the tale? “The being was pure evil, wasn’t he? I mean, what did he hope to accomplish?”

InuYasha’s voice was soft, sad, and he repeated Naraku’s words as the implications tore at him all over again. The disdain, the hatred, the festering futility of the animosity that had been borne of lust ripped him open and left him raw. “He wanted to pollute the jewel. He wanted it to be tainted in malice.”

Fingers stilled just for a moment, Kagome closed her eyes against the encompassing hurt, the agonizing betrayal.

With another deep breath meant to dull the ache inside, InuYasha cleared his throat before continuing the story, “The hanyou was confused, angry. He didn’t understand why she would turn on him, why she came after him . . .”

“But she loved him . . .”

“Yeah. She loved him. It wasn’t that . . .” trailing off with a sigh, InuYasha ran his hands over his face, as though he was trying to wipe away the hurt and bitterness that was resurrected with every telling of the story.

“You tell this story like you were there,” she mused softly, a slightly pained smile that was completely at odds with the concern in her eyes.

He forced a wan smile for her benefit. Her eyes narrowed slightly, and he knew she saw right through it. He couldn’t swallow the lump in his throat as started to speak again, not wanting to

continue yet needing to tell her more. “He had made an agreement to meet the priestess. She would bring the jewel, and he would use it to become human . . .” he trailed off with a sigh. Telling this story was difficult, painful, digging open wounds that were better left forgotten. How could it still hurt so deeply after so long had passed?

Still, Kagome wanted to know. With a deep breath, he continued, “The priestess used the last of her strength to find the hanyou and seal him on Goshinboku with her sacred arrow. He was stuck there for fifty years. He wasn’t alive or dead. He was just . . . there.”

Kagome gasped softly, her brow furrowing in confusion. “But if the priestess loved him, why would she want to change him? You don’t ask that, if you really love someone.”

InuYasha flinched. Kagome missed it. “She was the priestess in charge of guarding the Shikon no Tama. So long as the jewel existed, she wouldn’t be free to be with him, and he . . . he would have done anything for her. He would have given anything to *belong* with her.”

“He really loved her,” Kagome said. The catch in her voice was small.

InuYasha looked away. Memories converged into a tangled web, things that Kagome had never understood suddenly seemed to be clear to her, and yet there were things that she didn’t know, things he hadn’t gotten to tell her before. Small consolation that he could tell her now. The things she didn’t remember were the things he’d never forget. “He loved them *both*,” he whispered.

She frowned and shook her head, as though she didn’t understand what he meant. “Both?”

He nodded but felt inept, trying to express what he meant and failing. “The priestess who sealed him . . . and the priestess who set him free.”

“But, he couldn’t have. You can’t love two people at the same time.”

InuYasha sighed, wishing he could better explain everything, wishing he was better with words so he could tell her exactly how it could be so. “Says who? And it wasn’t the same. With the first priestess, it was complicated.”

“How could love be complicated?” Kagome challenged.

The gesture he made with his hands was borne of frustration, of his inability to express to her what he was trying to say. There were times when his forced isolation early in life showed itself. This was one of those times. He couldn’t find the words to say, the ones to explain what he meant. Still, he tried. “He never . . . he couldn’t trust her. She didn’t do anything for him to distrust her so much. It was hard for him. But she gave him something that had been missing for a long time before that.”

Her gentle fingers idly traced circles around the base of his ear. InuYasha had to force his eyes to remain open. “What did she give him?” Kagome finally asked. From the quiet tone in her voice, he could tell that she was hesitant to break the companionable silence that had fallen.

His smile was sad, ironic. When he thought back to that time, and to that place, it always left him feeling as though he had failed so miserably, failed Kikyō, and later, he'd failed Kagome, too. "She gave him hope. He didn't realize that until after the second priestess had released him from the seal."

"I don't understand . . ."

He could feel the intensity of his own stare as he looked into Kagome's confused eyes. She really didn't understand, and for reasons that he didn't want to dwell on, InuYasha was desperate for her to know. "Don't you? It was that hope that let the hanyō trust the second priestess."

Kagome sighed, her eyes still clouded in confusion. "Why couldn't the hanyō trust anyone?"

He shrugged in what he hoped was a nonchalant show. His tone was casual, maybe a little too casual. "He never knew his great youkai father. He died protecting the hanyō's mother. Then his mother died when the hanyō was young. He spent his childhood being chased away from humans because he was half-youkai. Then he was chased by the youkai because he was half-human, and because of who his father was. There was never anyone he could trust, until Ki—the first priestess."

"That's . . . so sad," she whispered. He could see in her expression sorrow for the hanyō who had no one. He looked away. She cleared her throat and went on, "And the second priestess? You said he loved them both. Why did he love her?"

InuYasha's grin was bittersweet, sad. Kagome didn't notice it. "Lots of reasons, none more important than the others. She made him smile. She trusted him, for no real reason at all. She taught him how to have friends, how to accept himself for being who he was instead of hating himself for not being able to be what he wasn't," voice soft, eyes closed, InuYasha couldn't look at her, couldn't stand to see that she didn't know that he was talking about her.

Kagome shook her head slowly, her fingers still idly toying with his ear. "But she's the one who broke the jewel."

"Not on purpose. She wouldn't have done it on purpose."

She laughed softly. "You're quick to defend her. She sounds a little clumsy."

"I just understand what the hanyō saw in her, I guess," he muttered as a flush stole up his cheeks. He cleared his throat and continued, "But the two of them started traveling together, seeking out the jewel shards that the priestess could sense. A kitsune joined them, then a human monk, and finally a youkai exterminator."

"Monk . . . Miroku."

InuYasha's heart seemed to plummet to his feet at her softly uttered words. Her eyes had a faraway, almost vague expression in them. "What did you say?"

Kagome started, her eyes cleared, and she blinked quickly as she stared down at him. "What? I didn't say anything . . . did I?"

She knew exactly what she had said, InuYasha realized. She was afraid to tell him what she knew. "You said a name," he countered gently.

She retrieved the cup of Ramen from the nightstand and briskly stirred the noodles. "You're probably still hungry, aren't you?"

InuYasha rolled onto his side and propped his head up. His elbow spanned her legs, and his eyes locked on her face. He didn't say anything as she fed him a few bites of the food. The entire time she stared into the cup unless she was offering him the noodles. She stared down at the chopsticks as her teeth gnawed on her bottom lip. Torturous images flashed through his mind, visions of Kagome and those teeth . . . InuYasha ruthlessly pushed the visions aside and concentrated on chewing the food she offered.

"You smell nice," he commented softly before she could stuff another mouthful in.

Kagome's eyes flashed up to meet his. Her eyes widened in alarm, and she gasped then choked out a small scream as she jerked her legs up and pushed herself back with her feet. The cup of soup fell from her fingers, and she screamed once more when the warm liquid drenched the front of her blouse. The white sailor's top instantly plastered against her skin, and InuYasha's eyes bulged at the translucent material. Every ridge, every hollow was visible. A strange growl forced its way out of his throat. He forced his eyes upward.

"You . . . what happened to you?"

Kagome stared at him in something akin to horror. It wasn't until InuYasha sat up and his hair fell over his shoulder that her words made sense. The glossy black locks spoke volumes. He stifled a groan. He'd transformed right in front of her very eyes and hadn't realized what was happening.

"You're *human*?" she gasped as she leaned forward to tug on the long hair beside his ears. He let her turn his head from side to side and stifled the urge to sigh as she tugged gently on his ears, as though to make certain they were really attached. "You really *are* human, aren't you?"

InuYasha sat back, his eyes cast down at his folded legs. He had ramen noodles all over him, and the bed was a covered, too. For the moment, he ignored the mess and concentrated on keeping his eyes off Kagome's blatantly obvious curves. "For the night, anyway," he grumbled.

"What does that mean?"

He let a frustrated growl escape and sighed. "I turn human every night of the new moon."



## ~Chapter 16~

### ~Suds-n-Bubbles~

Kagome leaned against the bathroom door and closed her eyes. The simple white dress shirt she'd retrieved from InuYasha's closet hung by her side, and she willed her heart to stop hammering so hard in her chest. *'Easier said than done. You always let him do this to you, Kagome. Pathetic!'* She let a weak smile surface at her chiding thoughts.

Her hand still tingled from the feel of the odd red haori that she'd touched while searching out a shirt to wear while he washed her clothes. There was something mysteriously familiar about that garment, something that she knew.

Kagome stripped off the dirty clothes and used one of the fluffy white washcloths to rinse the ramen residue from her skin before donning the white shirt. Taking her time buttoning it up, she breathed deeply, bringing the collar up to her nose to savor the clean untamable scent that clung to the material, stronger than the laundry detergent that lingered. It smelled like InuYasha.

A soft knock on the bathroom door startled her, and she pulled the door open to stare at the hanyou. He shifted from one foot to the other as she watched him, and soiled sheets spilled out of his arms. "I was going to start the washer," he explained nervously. *'Nervous? Why would he be nervous?'*

Kagome scooped up her dirty clothes and reluctantly handed them over, tugging at the hem of the shirt, as though to stretch it. He grinned slightly at her modest gesture. "Are you sure? I can start it up, if you want to change?"

For some reason, her offer seemed to offend him. His back straightened, and his eyes flashed in silent challenge. "Are you kidding? There ain't nothing to starting up a washer. I could do it any time." With that, he snatched the clothes out of her hands to add to the sheets he carried and stomped off.

She blinked in surprise as he stalked away. Why was he so upset? *'You stung his pride, implying that he couldn't do a simple thing like start the washer.'*

Kagome shook her head slowly and grabbed another wash cloth off the shelf. After using the other one to wipe off the sink and then laying it over the towel rack to dry, Kagome wet the clean cloth with warm water and wrung it out before turning off the light and heading back down the hallway.

InuYasha wasn't back yet. Kagome set the washcloth aside and started spreading the clean sheets on the stripped bed. *'The poor guy. He isn't feeling well, and then, because of my clumsiness, he has to work.'* She sighed as she tugged the sheet flat on the bed.

She'd just finished spreading the deep red comforter when InuYasha stomped back into the room with his scowl still in place. But his shirt was missing, and Kagome's heart skipped a beat at the expanse of flesh revealed. There was something poetic in his movements, something that spoke to her body, drew on her like the attraction between the yin and the yang. Did he feel that, too?

"Will you stop staring?" he grouched at last.

*'Maybe not,'* she thought with an inward sigh. Kagome wasn't sure whose flush was worse: his or her own. She averted his eyes as she straightened the blankets and swiped up the washcloth.

"Sorry," she mumbled as she extended the cloth. "I thought you might want this."

He didn't take it right away. Instead, she heard him flop onto the bed and finally dared a glance at him. Hands tucked neatly behind his neck and looking thoroughly relaxed, he looked like he hadn't just snapped at her, at all. She did a double take.

"You spilled the ramen," he remarked almost idly, plaintively. "If you're so concerned about my being dirty, you clean me up."

Her mouth dropped open. He caught the awestruck look and turned his face away. She swallowed hard and sat down on the edge of the bed. *'Do it fast, Kagome, and don't pay attention to what, exactly, you're wiping,'* she told herself.

It didn't really do any good. She might not see what she was touching, but she certainly could feel it. What began as a fast rub down slowed drastically as the heat of his skin radiated through the cloth. Odd, she had thought that his washcloths were quite thick. Obviously not. That strange rumble of his was back with a vengeance, and Kagome slowed her hand even more, allowing him to enjoy her touch and reveling in the knowledge that she was the cause of the contented sounds. Gathering her courage, Kagome peeked at his chest.

Her hand stopped for a moment as she stared, transfixed. Lean muscle, sinewy strength under his skin, it beckoned her, called to her, wrapped around her with invisible fingers that held her close, as though he was afraid somewhere deep down that he would lose her if he let her go. The perfect symmetry in his body was enthralling. Her throat was dry, rasping. She coughed once. He chuckled, as though he knew what he was doing to her and was enjoying her discomfort thoroughly.

The phone rang, cutting through the near-trance like a knife, and Kagome jumped. InuYasha grumbled something as he rolled off the bed, and she had a feeling that it was something that she was better off not hearing. He paused in the doorway long enough to glance back at her. His dark human eyes raked over her, a fierce yet gentle mix of emotion that Kagome didn't understand.

It wasn't until after he was gone that she realized that she held the cloth against her chest. Her shirt was damp, and her heart wouldn't slow down. With a weak laugh, she followed him out of the room, deciding to drop the cloth into the washer before the first cycle ended.

She stopped before InuYasha, who was glaring out the window as he held the phone receiver to his ear. Wordlessly, she held up the cloth and shrugged. He jerked his head toward the area of the house where the kitchen was, and Kagome started away.

She rounded the corner—one of the few corners in the house, actually—and stopped dead in her tracks. Eyes bugging out, mouth dropping wide, Kagome squeaked as she stared in horror at the mountain of bubbles engulfing the room. “I—nu—*Yasha!*” she muttered as she stepped carefully into the room.

She started scooping up handfuls of bubbles and dropped them into the deep sink across from the washer. The washer had stopped itself, apparently from too much soap, and more bubbles oozed out of the crack around the lid.

Kagome worked for nearly fifteen minutes in silence to clean up InuYasha's mess. If anything, the fiasco had spread and was even more daunting.

“Kagome? What are you—? *Shit!*” She turned her head to stare over her shoulder at InuYasha, who stood just inside the doorway with his eyes bugging out, too. “What happened in here?”

“*You* happened in here, I'd say,” she remarked dryly as she shook more bubbles off her hands into the sink. “What'd you do? Add the whole *bottle* of detergent?”

“Of course not!” he snapped as he flushed. Then he flinched. “Just what was left in the bottle.”

She didn't know if she wanted to ask the next question. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer. With a deep breath to brace herself, she asked, “Which was, how much?”

He scooped up an armload of bubbles and deposited them in the sink before answering, and his tone was disgruntled, as though he'd realized too late that he might have made a mistake. “Well . . . over half . . .”

Kagome rolled her eyes but kept working. “Why didn't you read the bottle if you didn't know how much detergent to add?”

“Keh!” he snorted, as though she ought to give him more credit than she was at the moment. “I *did* read the bottle. It said, for regular wash, add a capful of soap. For extra soiled wash, add more. So I added *more*.”

Kagome stopped long enough to pin InuYasha with an incredulous stare. He couldn't have really been that silly, could he? She started to smile despite her best efforts against doing so. But the smile spread till she finally threw her head back, laughing so hard that tears pooled in her eyes

and coursed down her cheeks. When she caught the look of utter disgust on InuYasha's face, her laughter escalated even more.

"What the hell are you laughing at, bitch?" he snarled as he continued to scoop bubbles. His face was red, his frown was fierce. For some reason, that only served to magnify Kagome's humor at the entire situation.

Kagome's laughter escalated. She was laughing so hard that she fell back against the washer. The jarring motion forced out more bubbles, soaking the back of her shirt. Her bare feet slid slowly out from under her, and she flopped down in the midst of the bubbles as her giggling became infectious. Suds floated in the air, landed in her hair, kissed her cheeks. Still she laughed.

InuYasha couldn't help himself as he chuckled with her. He knelt down in the suds next to her. She collapsed against him as another bout of laughter burst forth. He retrieved a small pile of bubbles and dabbed them on the end of Kagome's nose.

Her eyes crossed slightly as she stared at the suds on her face. With a mischievous glint lit her eyes, Kagome scooped up some soap and plopped it on his head.

He retaliated in kind, and Kagome shrieked when he smeared suds into her hair, and she paid him back for it.

"You asked for it, wench!"

"InuYasha, no!"

"Beg for mercy, and I might let you off the hook."

"I don't think you have any—*Stop!*" She laughed even harder as he chucked another armload of bubbles at her. Wiping off her face and sputtering, Kagome pushed herself onto her knees and slowly grabbed more suds. "All right, you had your chance. This is war."

He ducked as she lunged toward him. The pile of bubbles meant to hit him flew over his head and hit the wall. InuYasha straightened up, glancing over his shoulder at the suds oozing down the wall. "The housekeeper's going to be really mad," he commented. "Do you think I broke the washer?"

The seriousness in his tone made Kagome dissolve into another round of giggles. She scooped up more bubbles and managed to smear them all over his chest as he tried to get away.

By the time their battle was over, both of them were soaked to the skin and the room looked just awful. The bubbles that were left clung to odd places—hanging from the ceiling like stalactites, slowly creeping down walls and windows . . . The floor was slippery as a sheet of ice. But they were both smiling and gasping for breath. "Don't look at me," Kagome complained, trying to shield her face from his gaze.



## ~Chapter 17~

### ~Stay with Me

InuYasha stared thoughtfully at the game board between them. With deliberate slowness, he reached out and moved his red checker into striking range of both of Kagome's last two game pieces. She tugged at the hem of the too-short boxers she had found to wear while her clothing dried and tried to concentrate on the game instead of on the half-dressed hanyou who sat directly across from her. Clad in nothing but a pair of loose red warm up shorts tied at the waist, Kagome thought it was a bit of an underhanded tactic to use his body to thoroughly distract her mind from the game. *'Giving yourself a little too much credit there, Kagome? He's not dressed like that for you.'* Kagome stole another glance. InuYasha chuckled softly, and she tried in vain to keep her embarrassment from showing. *'A girl can dream, right?'*

"I ought to quit," she grumbled though she smiled. She could hardly believe that she had just taught him how to play this game. Since her initial instruction, they'd played five games, and he'd won each one with flourish. Now she was about to lose the sixth. She sighed.

When she peeked back up at him, she caught his troubled stare. With a small grin, Kagome shook her head. "I taught you too well, I think."

"You thirsty?" he asked as he started to get up. Kagome was faster.

"I'll get you whatever you want," she assured him. "Water? Soda?"

InuYasha slowly sank back down, careful not to move the checker board. "Water's fine," he called after her.

She shot him one last look before rounding the bar into the kitchen. "I'll know if you cheat," she remarked then shook her head at her own thoughts. "As if you need to, anyway. I thought you'd never played this before." She grabbed two bottles of water out of the refrigerator along with a wooden bowl of rice crackers and headed back into the living room just in time to see InuYasha jerk his hands away from the board.

"You're cheating!" she accused as she thrust a bottle of water and the bowl at him. InuYasha looked guilty but shook his head in denial. Kagome snorted and sat back on the sofa. She blinked in surprise as she glanced at the checkers' arrangement before her mouth dropped open and she stared in wonder. Cheated, yes. But he'd arranged the checkers so that she could easily beat him in one single move. "You're *letting* me win," she said softly.

“Keh!” InuYasha snorted just before he stuffed a handful of the rice crackers into his mouth. “I wouldn’t have to if you weren’t so bad at your own game.”

Kagome giggled. She reached over to get some crackers. He pulled the bowl away. Clamoring to her knees, she leaned across the game board. It slid off onto the floor, and she crawled across the sofa to take another swipe at the bowl. He pulled it away again as his deep, husky chuckling filled the quiet room.

“Didn’t your mother teach you to share?” she demanded after her third failed-attempt.

“Only child,” he retorted just before dropping another handful of crackers into his mouth.

“You’ve got a brother, though, don’t you?”

InuYasha took his time chewing and swallowing. “Sesshoumaru? He doesn’t count, damn bastard. Anyway, he’s only my half-brother, and he was grown by the time I was born.”

Kagome’s frown faded, and she stopped trying to get the bowl though she didn’t sit back down. She cocked her head to the side and bit her bottom lip. “You . . . didn’t have a very good childhood, did you?”

InuYasha shot her an almost frightened look before staring into the dancing flames on the hearth. “It wasn’t so bad. Why?”

“Come on, InuYasha . . . You didn’t even know how to play checkers.”

“Checkers is for pups,” he scoffed.

“My grandpa plays checkers.”

“Pups and old men, then.”

With gentle fingers, Kagome reached over and turned his face toward hers. Her thumb stroked his jaw line. His eyes wouldn’t meet hers. “And you’ve never had anyone to love?” When he refused to answer and still refused to meet her gaze, she drew her own conclusion. Her hand dropped away, and she sank back on her haunches, wrapping her arms around her raised knees and resting her chin on them. “Where is she now?”

InuYasha shook his head slowly, as though he wasn’t going to answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft despite the dejected look on his face. “She . . . she forgot about me, about *us*.” His eyes finally met hers. He slowly leaned forward, looping his fingers under the prayer beads that she still wore. He rubbed them idly, lovingly. A single tear welled in his right eye and traced a salty path down his cheek. Before he could wipe it away, Kagome reached out and caught it with her index finger.

He watched in mute wonder as she lifted the same finger to her lips, her tongue flicking out to catch the moisture. "Why did you do that?" he asked as his hand fell away from her.

Kagome shrugged, her own eyes suspiciously bright. She cleared her throat before answering, and as she did, she offered him a weak smile. "Mama always said that if you catch the first tear, your wish will come true."

He looked even more pained at that. Kagome sighed softly.

"What did you wish for?" he questioned.

She tried to smile. She really did. But the searing pain in her heart nearly undid her, and she knew that the attempt had failed when he grimaced. "I wished that she'd remember you."

"Kagome . . ."

The clock on the mantle above the small fire chimed ten.

Before he could say more, and before Kagome lost her nerve, she dragged off the necklace and shoved it into his hand. "You wanted these before, right? Because they remind you of . . . her . . . don't they?"

"Yeah," he replied slowly, staring in wide-eyed amazement at the prayer bead and fang necklace in his open palm. "But . . ."

He started to reach for her. Kagome shot to her feet and hurried toward the door. She grabbed her shoes and sat on the bench to put them on. InuYasha knelt down beside her, his hand on hers to stop her. "What are you doing?"

She forced a shrill laugh. He cringed but didn't let go. "It's getting late, and . . . I should get home. I think you'll be fine."

The expressions seemed to fly over his face. Panic, desperation, and finally determination. InuYasha leaned against her, letting his head drop into her lap. "I feel really dizzy, all of a sudden," he said. "I don't think I'll be able to stand it."

Kagome realized two things. Firstly, he really wanted her to stay longer. Secondly, he was a horrible actor. She giggled and let her shoes drop with a sigh. "A little longer," she allowed. "But I've got to get home soon, InuYasha."

His chin lifted enough so that he could grin up at her. His smile faded slowly, leaving a burning intensity in its wake. "Kagome, will you stay with me? Until I fall asleep?"

For reasons that Kagome didn't want to dwell on, her heart soared at his request. "All right," she agreed slowly. "Let me call Mama."

InuYasha nodded and stood before catching her hands and dragging her to her feet, too. He headed back toward the living room to bank the fire and pick up the game as Kagome punched in her home phone number. She ended up leaving a quick message on the answering machine as she stared at the old sword that hung above the fireplace mantle. Her mom had gone out to play bridge with some friends. She was obviously still out.

She was still staring thoughtfully at the sword when InuYasha turned off the lights and headed past her, down the hallway toward his bedroom. Before he reached the door, however, he stopped to cast her a curious glance. "Aren't you going to tuck me in?"

"Tuck you in? How old are you? Five?"

"Keh! You're never too old to be tucked in, wench."

"Wench?"

He snorted again but didn't answer, disappearing into the bedroom with a very pronounced sigh.

Kagome's smile returned as her idyll was lost. She shook her head and followed him down the hallway. He was already in bed. She pulled up the covers and tucked them under his chin. Then she sat in the chair beside the bed. InuYasha frowned but he didn't comment.

She reached over and turned the lamp lower and settled down with her chin in her raised palm. Try as she might to keep her eyes open and her mind alert, she could feel her lids getting heavier, and when InuYasha's low rumble sounded, she thought that the all-too-comforting resonance he made sounded like a lullaby. Transporting her mind to another place, a gentle whisper of fantasies wrapped her up in a single sound, a vibration that reached out to her and drew her in as the darkest shadows faded. Her eyes closed, and she was captured in the comfort of his world as the remaining traces of coherence disappeared, and suddenly she was with him in a wild place where time meant nothing. InuYasha's resonance surrounded her, sheltered her, protected her.

*He ran through a meadow with her on his back. Flying by light of the full moon, she laughed at something he said as he sprang off of the ground to soar into the skies. 'Touch the moon, Kagome?'*

*'A little higher, InuYasha . . . just a little more, and I think I can . . .'*

*'Then hold on tight. I've never jumped this high before. I can do it, though. Watch!'*

*Kagome giggled though her grip didn't tighten. He wouldn't let her fall . . .*

Lighter than air, she mused. As though being lifted in the strongest arms that gave her a sense of immense security, Kagome smiled. A fluid movement, and suddenly she found herself cradled against a warm chest, wrapped in strong arms, and so completely content that she didn't want to wake.



## ~~Chapter 18~~

### ~Dawn's First Rays~

InuYasha awoke slowly, feeling as though the entire world was brighter, sunnier, with the strange inner knowledge that today was going to be a beautiful day. It has been a very long time since he had felt this way. Could he remember *ever* having felt this way?

Kagome lay nestled against his chest, her hair tousled and soft as silk where it fanned over his arm. Her small frame was wrapped trustingly, securely against him. No doubt about it, he decided with a self-satisfied smile. She belonged right there, with him, in his arms.

The red tee shirt he'd given her to wear brought a rosy glow to her skin. It amazed him, how the shirt that fit him so well could seem so enormous on her small frame. She looked like a child playing in her father's clothes. The neckline that he'd cut slightly so that it didn't choke him allowed the garment to slide over her shoulder, and he stared at the exposed flesh, heart hammering wildly. To him it looked like the rest of the woman: soft, inviting, comforting. Brushing his fingertips over it, he felt the instant threads of desire tighten around him, drawing him closer to her. *'What doesn't kill you will make you stronger,'* his mind taunted.

*'Shuddup.'*

InuYasha stifled a groan and forced his thoughts out the window. It wasn't quite light out yet. But dawn wasn't far off. He could smell it on the breeze, which meant his youkai powers were starting to return. He breathed deep again and moaned softly as his senses were engulfed by Kagome again, the richness of her skin, the sweetness that clung to her hair. With every beat of her heart, her body called to him. If she only knew what it was she did to him, if she only understood . . . He was going to drive himself crazy if he didn't get his mind off her quickly. *'Easier said than done . . .'* If he didn't stop thinking about her soon, he wouldn't be responsible for his actions . . .

The sun was just starting to come up over the horizon. He could see the ribbons of color beginning to streak across the sky. He yawned and sighed, smiling slightly as he let his eyes drift closed again. Having Kagome this close . . . it was enough, for now.

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Kagome felt as though she was swimming up through the layers of sleep in no real hurry to crest the surface and actually have to open her eyes. Kagome smiled slightly as she felt the strong

arms holding her close, and she could hear his contented rumbles. Had he made that sound all night? If he had, then it wasn't really surprising that she had slept like a baby.

Cautiously, she cracked one eye open. His face was turned toward hers but his eyes were still closed. His hair was still black, and the slight breeze filtering through the many windows in the room ruffled it with invisible fingers. As she watched him sleep, his brow furrowed slightly, as though he was having a bad dream. Without a second thought, Kagome reached over and smoothed the lines away. He moaned and grinned slightly.

He made her feel good inside, she realized with a tender smile. It was unsettling, almost frightening, how much she liked to look at him. When his eyes were open, it was easy to forget that he was only nineteen, probably almost twenty. There was something older in the depths of his eyes, something that bespoke an age that went far beyond his years. He baffled her. Most of the time, he was gruff, almost shy. But then he had moments when he would almost taunt her into doing something that she normally wouldn't have done, like wipe off his chest.

The memory of the intimacy in that action brought an immediate blush to her cheeks, and Kagome was glad that he was sleeping. He seemed to enjoy her embarrassment, as though he had accomplished something great every time he made her flush.

His tawny flesh seemed almost to glow in the dim light filtering through the windows and skylight above. The darkness of the prayer beads around his neck added a strange contrast. She wanted to reach out and touch him but she didn't. She wasn't sure if she was more afraid that she would wake him or if she feared what would happen if she did. But he was asleep, and as long as he didn't wake up, what harm would there be in looking at him?

She smiled to herself. There wouldn't be any harm done. None at all. Still, she couldn't allow her eyes to travel lower than his stomach. The muscles rippled under his skin as he breathed, like a symphony. She knew that he'd slept in the loose shorts he'd put on after their soap fight. Those were held up by a drawstring at the waist. Kagome bit her lip and quickly glanced over. The shorts were still tied. The bow stuck out above the waistband. But they had loosened enough that they just hugged his hips. Mesmerized by the sharp angle of the protruding bones, she stared. Harsh angles over delicate hollows whispered secrets that Kagome didn't dare listen to, InuYasha's body amazed her. *'A modern girl, maybe,'* she mused. *'But some things,'* she thought as she blushed again and quickly looked away, *'are better left to the imagination, for now.'*

A slight groan escaped him. With gentle fingers, Kagome reached over and smoothed InuYasha's bangs off of his forehead. As her fingers moved the hair aside, she frowned. The midnight strands under her touch seemed to be fading, and she stared in wonder as the color slowly receded, leaving behind the shining silver locks that she better knew. The human ears disappeared as his dog ears reemerged, and Kagome grinned despite herself. Why did she love those ears so much?

As if in answer to her unvoiced question, InuYasha's ears twitched. He sighed happily, and Kagome's grin widened. That had to be the reason.

Carefully so that she didn't disturb the sleeping man, Kagome extricated herself from his grasp and got up despite the almost overwhelming desire to climb back into the bed. The rumbling abruptly stopped, and he whined softly. Kagome very nearly gave in.

Unfortunately, there were a few very necessary things that she had to do, and she didn't think they'd wait. She smiled again as she walked around the foot of the bed, staring at InuYasha's legs. He had very fine looking silvery hairs on his skin. Was it as soft as his regular hair? She sighed and shook her head in self-disgust. She really needed to get a grip on herself.

The pale morning's light filtered in the higher bathroom windows, and Kagome was thankful. Artificial light had its merits, sure. But it somehow seemed out of place here, in InuYasha's domain. There was something completely simple about him, as though he didn't care at all for modern conveniences. The shower fixtures were gleaming and bright, and not for the first time did she wonder if he had ever even used it, and if he didn't, what did he do instead? Too many things in this, his home, seemed untouched.

She took care of her bathroom needs quickly enough and paused long enough to wash her face off and used one of the extra toothbrushes on the wall shelf. Curiously, there were about five of them on the shelf, and only one of them had been opened. She had opened another. She doubted he'd care.

When she tried to brush out her hair, however, Kagome had to blink back tears. Some of the soap residue from last night was still there, and it made it more difficult to brush through. With a few choice words, none of them overly harsh, Kagome finally managed to finish when the phone rang.

InuYasha was still asleep; she saw when she peeked into his room. Unwilling to wake him, Kagome ran down the hallway and snatched up the phone on the third ring.

"Izayoi residence," she said, careful to keep her voice down.

"Kagome? Is that you?"

Kagome made a guilty face. She'd forgotten that she'd said she'd be home shortly when she'd left the message last night . . . "Mama?"

"Did you sleep well? You sound like you did. Is InuYasha around? I thought he might as well come to breakfast since he'll likely see you home?"

"He's still sleeping," she said then flinched. *'Wow,'* she thought wryly. *'That didn't sound good.'*

"I'll have breakfast ready in about an hour or so."

"Um, okay," Kagome agreed, feeling suddenly dizzy. Guilt, embarrassment, and another, more unrecognizable emotion warred for dominance. Kagome wanted to run and hide. "I'll ask him."

Kagome's mom chuckled. "Oh, and Kagome? I think you and I need to have a talk after breakfast."

The line went dead, and Kagome stared at it with dumbfounded confusion. She drew a deep breath to settle the butterflies in her stomach as she dropped the receiver back into place and turned to head back toward InuYasha's room.

Still huddled on his side facing away from her, Kagome sat down and stared at his broad back, at the rise and fall of his breathing. Wishing she could draw some calm from him, Kagome willed herself to recall the contentment she'd experienced when she had first opened her eyes to see InuYasha's sleeping face.

Without thinking, Kagome reached out and gently stroked InuYasha's ear. Almost instantly, his rumble started again, and he rolled over toward her but didn't wake. Why did making him feel at ease and comfortable make her feel so good inside?

She wasn't in a hurry to wake him, either. He looked entirely too peaceful, too content. Actually, she was hard-pressed to leave him at all, and even though her mother was expecting her home, Kagome was loath to comply.

She was staring so intently at his ears that she didn't notice when his eyes opened. Suddenly, though, she could feel his stare on her, and she didn't have to look to know. It was enough to unleash a whole new brigade of butterflies loose, tremors erupting in her belly.

"Good morning," she said softly, finally daring to meet his gaze. Her breath caught somewhere between her nose and her lungs as she was captured in the liquid intensity behind those golden eyes. She drew her hands back away from his head. "Sorry . . . if I woke you . . ."

His hands moved so quickly that Kagome only saw a blur of flesh as he reached out and dragged her down beside him. He leaned up on his elbow and traced the curve of her cheek and jaw with the claw on his index finger. Her eyes drifted closed at the shocking yet gentle touch then snapped open again when he brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips. Delicious quivers coursed over her at the contact.

Grabbing at her rapidly scattering thoughts, Kagome had to clear her throat a few times before she could use her voice. "Mama called . . . She asked you to come to . . . breakfast . . ."

His lips fell to hers. She gasped at the contact. Sensation shot to the fore, and her breathing faltered. Warm at first but rapidly escalating to a burning scorch, the softness of his mouth was so different from the rigid strength that she knew he possessed.

His hand cupped her cheek, caressed her skin, and he leaned over her. His lips brushed against hers softly, gently, like the flutter of a butterfly's wings, only to return again. She held onto his shoulders, scarcely able to believe what was happening and unable to control the quavers in her



## ~~Chapter 19~~

### ~Pearls of Wisdom~

InuYasha fell into step next to Kagome. She was smiling at nothing—or maybe it was everything—as he took her hand in his. It occurred to him again, as it had so many times before, that being with her, beside her, felt like being at home.

The companionable silence reigned as they walked. Kagome wore one of his dress shirts with a pair of his shorts. The entire ensemble was ridiculously large on her yet somehow, it looked perfect. Her clothes were folded and draped over her arm. They were so wrinkled from the dryer, though, that he had told her to wear something of his.

Movement caught the corner of his gaze as he took a bite of the roll he'd snatched before stepping out of the house, and InuYasha stopped, turning his head to look in the direction of the disturbance. In the shadows of the trees, a large white dog peered out at him. He discerned from her scent that she was a female, and as he stared at her, she bowed her head. Her coat was dull and dirty, and InuYasha could tell that it had been a long time since she had had a decent meal.

“Aww, the poor thing!” Kagome murmured as she knelt down on the ground. She made soothing noises to coax out the animal. The dog shied away. “It’s so skinny.”

InuYasha could sense the animal’s reluctance to come out of hiding. He held the roll out toward the dog. Slowly, she crept forward but stopped after a few steps. He could tell that she desperately wanted the offered food. Without really thinking, he growled low in his throat. Kagome didn’t react as though she’d heard the noise, but the dog crept a little closer. InuYasha tossed out the roll, making eye contact with the creature as he did so. The dog bowed her head slightly, in deference to InuYasha’s gesture, grabbed the roll, and ran off into the trees again.

Kagome turned her head and grinned up at him. He caught the look and scowled. “What?”

She shrugged as she stood up and her smile widened. “That was really sweet of you.”

“Keh.”

“Not `keh’!” she argued, leaning into him just a little. The contact shot straight through him. It nearly knocked him over. He moaned softly. She kept talking and didn’t hear the sound. “It was sweet! Poor dog looked like it hadn’t had a bite to eat in days.”

“She’ll be fine,” he maintained stubbornly as sudden, irrational anger shot to the fore. He had always hated it when Kagome made a fuss over his more unguarded moments. It made him feel weak, as though he was somehow lacking.

“She?” Kagome echoed.

“The dog is female,” he explained as bitterness edged aside the anger, and he had to swallow the urge to lash out. He made a face. He shouldn’t *have* to explain any of this to her. She’d spent most all of the last couple of years with him, and no matter how often he reminded himself of late that she wasn’t to blame for her memory loss, he also couldn’t quite help but feel a little frustrated with her for it. *‘It wasn’t her doing,’* his mind whispered. He shoved that thought aside. Her doing or not, couldn’t she see that it was going to kill him?

“How do you know?”

InuYasha stopped, hands on hips, as he glared over at the tree line and the white dog cowering in the shadows. “Because,” he said, careful to keep his tone even, “I’m *half* inu-youkai, remember?” He started forward again but halted when Kagome’s small hand reached out to stay him.

“Why are you angry?” she asked softly, her eyes probing his for answers.

As quickly as it had come, the anger drained out of him. Staring at her, he reminded himself for the millionth time that, for whatever reason, she really *didn’t* remember, and she wasn’t trying to hurt him at all. He reached out and brushed his knuckles against her cheek, relishing the way her eyes drifted closed as he touched her. “I’m not,” he assured her.

Kagome opened her eyes and smiled. “Come on. Mama’s going to freak if we don’t hurry.”

He let her take his hand and drag him forward, a slight frown furrowing his brow. The memory of Kagome, catching his tear and making her wish unsettled him . . . if she only knew . . .

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InuYasha grimaced and reigned in the desire to chuck the video game controller across the room. Souta giggled mercilessly, and InuYasha sighed. The youngster was handing him his ass on a platter.

“You stink at this, InuYasha,” the boy commented, which only served to darken InuYasha’s already dangerous glower. He restarted the match, and InuYasha rolled his eyes. His pride couldn’t take much more of this, he thought wryly. *‘If the fighters on the game were real, I could take `em . . .’*

After having his rear kicked soundly again, InuYasha set the controller aside and got up to stomp out of the living room. Souta's laughter followed him. Heading for the kitchen with the intent to grab a bottle of water, InuYasha stopped short at the sounds of Kagome and her mother's voices coming from inside. He was about to turn around and walk away when he heard his name. Instead, he stopped to listen.

"How do you feel about InuYasha?" Mrs. Higurashi asked.

Kagome giggled. "He's cute—adorable, in fact."

"Looks are a plus," her mother agreed. "But surely there's more to him than that?"

"There is," Kagome granted then sighed. "I wasn't talking about his looks, though. I mean, he *is* cute. He fed a stray dog this morning but hated it when I pointed out the sweetness of it."

"Some men are uncomfortable, showing their softer sides."

"Maybe," Kagome agreed slowly. "He really is gentle, though. Sure, he likes to act tough. But I wonder . . . I don't think he's had a very easy life."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Higurashi asked as she lifted a mug of coffee to her lips. InuYasha could smell the strong drink where he stood and wrinkled his nose.

"Just some things he's said," Kagome remarked. "He's good enough at checkers, though." He grinned at the disgusted tone in her voice. "But he let me win, too."

"He let you win?"

Kagome nodded then shook her head. Her mother looked duly confused. "He moved the checkers so I could win."

"He did, did he?"

Kagome drew a deep breath, her tone nonchalant. InuYasha could tell that it was forced. "Mama . . . have you ever felt like you knew someone, even though you really couldn't? Sometimes I think that I know him better than I know myself, and the weird part is, I think he knows me like that, too."

"What does that mean to you, Kagome?" Mrs. Higurashi asked gently.

Kagome sighed. "I've only known him for two months but it feels like so much longer. I feel like I've known him my whole life. Do you know what I mean?"

Mrs. Higurashi's chuckle was gentle, soothing. The sound of it reminded InuYasha of something vague, something he'd heard a lifetime ago. He frowned in concentration as he tried to remember.

“I know exactly what you mean, dear. It’s the same way I felt about your father.” She laughed again when her daughter gasped softly. Without seeing her face, InuYasha knew that Kagome was blushing.

The warmth behind Mrs. Higurashi’s laughter reminded InuYasha of his mother’s soft chuckles. She died when he was so young that he had trouble remembering a lot about her. But her laughter . . . this he remembered. Izayoi hadn’t done it often. Still, it was a sound that he would never truly forget.

InuYasha heard a chair scrape against the floor, and he smelled Kagome’s scent shift as she stood up. She seemed to engulf his senses leaving his mind reeling. *‘Get a hold on yourself,’* his mind chided. *‘You’re a hanyou. Act like one. Surely a human can’t bewitch you so easily.’* He sighed. Apparently, this human could.

“I need a bath, Mama, if we’re done?”

Mrs. Higurashi caught InuYasha lingering in the doorway and smiled at him. “Certainly, dear. Can I get you something to drink, InuYasha?”

He nodded and stepped back as Kagome brushed past him. She shot him a quick smile before she headed off to gather her things for her bath. He watched her go with a bemused grin. Mrs. Higurashi cleared her throat behind him. He offered her a sheepish smile as he turned to face her once more.

“Come, sit down, InuYasha,” Mrs. Higurashi coaxed, setting a bottle of water down on the table in the space Kagome had just vacated. “We should talk.”

InuYasha did as she requested, idly twisting the bottle in his hands as he wondered just what it was that Mrs. Higurashi had on her mind. She stared past him at the small white television mounted under the cabinet. The news was on. Talking about the latest in the rash of serial muggings, Mrs. Higurashi’s expression grew apprehensive as she shook her head and sighed. But she finally picked up the remote and flicked off the set before turning her attention back on InuYasha. “These muggings worry me,” she commented in a neutral tone.

InuYasha nodded in agreement, wondering why the woman didn’t just say what was really on her mind. Surely the muggings weren’t the real reason she wanted to talk to him. He had a feeling it had something to do with where Kagome had spent the prior night that was on Mrs. Higurashi’s mind. “They worry me, too,” he agreed, careful to keep his tone as neutral as hers was.

Mrs. Higurashi sighed. “And you know that isn’t really why I wanted to talk to you, don’t you?”

He shot her a quick glance. To his amazement, she reached over and tweaked his ear. His eyes widened. “You . . . you *know*.”

Mrs. Higurashi glanced around and leaned closer, a mischievous smile adding a youthful sparkle to her dark eyes. “I never forgot, InuYasha.”

Shaking his head slowly, InuYasha stared down at his unopened water bottle in confusion. “If you remember, then why doesn’t Kagome? What happened?”

His question brought on a heavy sigh. “I don’t really know why Kagome’s forgotten. But there’s more to it than her simply forgetting. Somehow things have been changed. Not only does my daughter not remember the adventure you two shared, it seems as though it never has happened. His gaze shot up to meet Mrs. Higurashi’s but he remained silent, waiting for her to continue. “Because of this, Kagome will finish school in a few weeks. She’ll finish early. She’s always been bright. Because of her birthday, she’s always been almost two years ahead of most kids her age. I thought maybe she would need this since I knew . . .” Mrs. Higurashi trailed off and suddenly stood up. She held her hand out to him, and when he hesitantly took hold of it, she tugged till he stood, too. “Why don’t you and I go for a walk? There are a few things that I should tell you.”

Obediently, he followed Mrs. Higurashi through the house and out the back door. She stopped long enough to tell Souta where they were going. Then she led the way through the shrine courtyard and out the back gate that led into the heart of his forest.

“When I was pregnant with Kagome, her father and I used to take long walks through this forest,” Mrs. Higurashi said softly as they ambled through the trees. “Often, when he was at work, I’d walk here for hours, too. I could hear her better out here. I think the trees blocked out the noises of the city.”

“Hear who?”

She shook her head and chuckled softly. The sound of it lent InuYasha courage though he didn’t understand why it would be so. “I never rightfully knew. At the time, I thought maybe it was Kagome speaking to me, but now I’m not so sure.” InuYasha intercepted the meaningful glance Mrs. Higurashi sent him. “I didn’t hear her voice right away, you see. I don’t think it was until the first time I felt Kagome move that I heard that voice with any sort of clarity, but she told me this story. She asked me to remember it. It was the story of a hanyou named InuYasha, a priestess named Kikyō . . . and my daughter.”

InuYasha stopped mid-stride and turned to stare at Mrs. Higurashi. “That’s impossible.”

“Of course it isn’t impossible, InuYasha. Your story happened over five hundred years ago. Understand that all of it was already done long before Kagome was born, but she had a part to play. It was my responsibility to make sure that she was prepared for the task. So you see, I knew you would protect her. I knew you would keep my daughter safe. I knew that you would prevail against Naraku. I knew that Kagome would restore the jewel. It was hers, after all, and I knew . . . I knew how my daughter would feel about you. What I *didn’t* know was what would happen to the two of you after you both fulfilled your destinies.”

“Destinies?” he echoed as he sank down on a boulder. He shook his head slowly. “Destiny is something you don’t have a choice in, something you can’t choose to do. You can’t achieve destiny until you die.”

Mrs. Higurashi tweaked his ear again. “Your destiny was to protect my daughter, and her destiny was to help you defeat Naraku. You’ve both done that. The thing is, this voice that spoke to me couldn’t tell me what would happen after the quest was over. Kagome came home, and I have no idea what took place that made her forget you or the things you’d accomplished together.”

InuYasha swallowed hard, willing himself to tell Mrs. Higurashi what he knew. It was difficult. He cleared his throat a couple of times before he could trust himself to speak. “Kagome wished Kikyou back to life. Kagome purified the jewel by bringing Kikyou back.”

A look of complete understanding crossed Mrs. Higurashi’s features, and she nodded slowly. “Because she believed this was what you wanted? That makes sense. I don’t think there’s a thing in this world that Kagome wouldn’t have done to make you happy. Something tells me just from you being here that it wasn’t something you wanted, after all.”

InuYasha shook his head and sighed. “Keh. Fat lot she knows about what I want.”

“What *do* you want?”

He could feel the immediate flush break over his features, and InuYasha stubbornly looked away. “I want Kagome to remember me.”

Mrs. Higurashi nodded, and he had a feeling that she understood exactly what he meant. She forced a smile. “I must confess, I was rather shocked that you somehow became a teacher.”

He made a face. “That wasn’t by choice. That was all cooked up by Shippou, Sesshoumaru, and Kagura before I ever got here.”

“Having known you as long as I have, it is hard for me to remember sometimes that you are still very young, InuYasha.”

He recognized her teasing for what it was and offered her a half-smile. “Keh.”

Mrs. Higurashi laughed again. “How old are you?”

He frowned as he considered her question. The fifty years pinned to the tree didn’t count. “Twenty.” He made a face. “Almost.”

“According the Kagome’s friends, you’re one of the most popular teachers at the school.”

He shifted uncomfortably. He had noticed some discomfiting looks from some of the students in his various physical education classes. He’d ignored them. “I’m just a substitute. I don’t think I’m teacher material. Still . . . it ain’t so bad.”

Mrs. Higurashi considered that. “What is it that you’d like to do then, if not teach?”

InuYasha couldn’t answer that. He hadn’t really considered it. He’d never thought he’d end up spending the rest of his life on this side of the well, and while they had been searching the jewel shards and hunting Naraku, he hadn’t had time to consider such a thing as a future after it was all said and done. “I don’t know,” he confessed. The only thing he did know was that whatever it was he chose to do, he wanted to do it with Kagome by his side.

Mrs. Higurashi nodded. “Let me know if I can help you with anything at all. I’ll be more than happy to, if I can.”

InuYasha looked away, embarrassed at Mrs. Higurashi’s offer of assistance.

They fell into silence for a few minutes, each of them lost in thoughts of their own. InuYasha, for the most part, tried to imagine doing something with his life in this time that he was still trying to adapt to. Maybe he would ask Kagome what she thought . . .

Mrs. Higurashi’s soft voice interrupted his musings. “InuYasha . . . the fact that you’re here proves to me how much you love my daughter, but I must ask you to promise me something.”

His eyes shifted to the side to lock with Mrs. Higurashi’s. The woman looked deathly serious despite the wan smile on her face. “What’s that?”

Mrs. Higurashi drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’d like your word that you won’t push Kagome into anything that she isn’t ready for. If and when she remembers you will be time enough for that.”

“You want me to keep my hands off of her, is that it?”

Mrs. Higurashi flinched and blushed but nodded. “Until she remembers you and can make a decision like that based on all the facts, yes, that’s exactly what I’m asking.”

InuYasha felt the skin on his face grow even warmer. He jerked his head once in a nod. Did Mrs. Higurashi honestly think that he had set out to lure Kagome into his bed?

A warm, fuzzy white head nudged under his hand. InuYasha glanced down at the stray white dog who now sat beside him, staring up at him with a sad expression in the depths of her eyes.

He flinched inwardly as the memory washed over him of waking up this morning with Kagome held securely in his arms. Yet as sweet as that had been, the truth of it all was that, if he was completely honest with himself, he desperately wanted Kagome, but he needed her to remember him even more.

It seemed like a vicious circle, didn’t it? Each thing hinged on the other. In the end, what would happen if she never remembered?



~~Chapter 20~~

~Toga and Aiko

InuYasha tried in vain to soothe the crying child in his arms. However, despite his best efforts, the girl's wails grew louder. The white dog howled as she followed in their wake, and the boy who ran to keep up with InuYasha's fast gait raised his voice to be heard over the din. "Can we play now, Uncle Yasha? Daddy said you would play with me. Can we?" The boy plastered his hands over his ears and grimaced as Aiko's wailing grew louder. "Make her *stop!*"

InuYasha commiserated with the boy. If the girl's wailing bothered him this much, he could only imagine what the noise was doing to the young boy. "I'm trying," he snapped, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice. "Move *faster!*"

Aiko's silvery hair stuck up all over her head, and InuYasha tried to soothe her as he felt his nerves being undone, one by one. Like threads stretched too far, the strands of his patience were snapping rapidly. The dog's howling escalated as the child's volume climbed.

'*Kagome,*' InuYasha thought wildly, trying his hardest to block the nearly painful noise from his mind. '*Hurry up, Kagome!*'

"I w-want Ma-ma!" the girl wailed between sobs. InuYasha settled her more securely against his shoulder and quickened his step. Kagome raced out of the trees toward them, and InuYasha heaved a sigh of relief.

"Aww," Kagome crooned as she took the child out of InuYasha's arms. "Has she been crying the entire time?"

InuYasha sighed, flexing his arms. The substantial walk from his house deep in the forest to the shrine with the weeping child had seized up the muscles. To his amazement, Aiko's wailing stopped suddenly as she stared up at Kagome with her wide amber eyes. Her breathing was harsh and stuttering from her tantrum. That Kagome had been able to instantly soothe the child was, in InuYasha's opinion, astounding. "She's been crying since Sesshoumaru dropped them off," he admitted. "But that bas—"

Kagome made a growling noise to cut him off, and her eyes shot meaningfully toward both children before returning to pin him with a pointed look. "Need I remind you that it is their *father* you were about to insult?" she asked quietly, still mindful of the five year-old boy who glanced curiously from InuYasha to Kagome, and back again.

InuYasha rolled his eyes but resisted the urge to finish the condemnation of his sibling. “Sesshoumaru didn't leave me a phone number where Kagura is, and his cell phone is out of range.” He paused and shuffled his feet. “Anyway, thanks for helping me.”

Kagome shifted Aiko onto her hip and grinned as the girl laid her head against Kagome's heart. “They're adorable.”

“Keh.” Adorable, maybe, but not when he had yet to get his ears to stop ringing. Aiko had a decent set of lungs, at least . . .

“Can we play *now*, Uncle Yasha?” Toga asked, tugging insistently on InuYasha's hand.

InuYasha glanced back at Kagome. She sat down in the grass under a tree with Aiko on her lap. The little girl looked happy for the first time since Sesshoumaru had dropped them off.

Having just gotten home after his talk with Kagome's mother, InuYasha hadn't been in the right frame of mind to talk to his brother, but Sesshoumaru had sounded sincerely desperate, and InuYasha hadn't been able to bring himself to tell Sesshoumaru to shove it when he had asked InuYasha to watch the children. As loath as he was to admit it, Sesshoumaru had been fairly decent to him since he had come out on this side of the well.

Kagura had apparently been called to an emergency board meeting at the school, and Sesshoumaru had some urgent business to take care of. Since it was the nanny's day off, he hadn't had a choice but to ask InuYasha to do it.

What InuYasha hadn't counted on was the wash of tears that had filled Aiko's eyes as Sesshoumaru had shut the door. Seconds after the tears had come, Aiko's bottom lip had started to quiver precariously. Then she opened her mouth and howled, and that had galvanized InuYasha into action. He'd offered her juice, cookies, candy, cartoons, everything. It seemed to him that everything he tried to comfort her only made her cry harder. He'd tried to reach Sesshoumaru on his cell phone and had even tried calling their house. He'd been absolutely desperate when he'd dialed Kagome's number and had only said one word to her when she'd answered the phone: “*Help!*”

Toga smacked InuYasha's arm and yelled, “Tag! You're it!” before taking off at an all-out run. The white dog loped beside the boy. InuYasha frowned.

“You're supposed to chase him,” Kagome said softly from her seat under the tree.

His look must have confirmed that he had no idea what she was talking about. Kagome giggled. “It's a game. You chase him. When you catch him, you tag him, and he's `it' then.”

InuYasha was about to scoff that he wasn't going to play when the child called out, “What's wrong? Too slow to catch me, hanyou?”

He heard Kagome's sharp gasp and saw her cover her mouth in shock as he lit out after the child. Toga squealed in delight as InuYasha closed the distance between them. The dog loped back to run alongside InuYasha. Toga ran as fast as his five year-old legs could go, his long raven hair streaming out behind him as his childish laughter rang out in the forest.

“Dammit, I'm going to get him,” InuYasha commented as he raced after the boy. The white dog by his side jumped and barked happily.

The child was quick, InuYasha had to admit. More than once, Toga managed to dodge just in time to avoid being tagged, and his high-pitched giggles echoed through the forest. After nearly ten minutes, InuYasha finally tagged the boy, and a new chase began.

InuYasha ran past Kagome and Aiko then veered to duck behind the tree. Toga skidded to a stop and suddenly eyed Kagome curiously, as though he hadn't actually seen her when she had first arrived. “You're a human,” he stated flatly. “I am youkai.”

InuYasha didn't have to see her face to know that Kagome was smiling. The emotion carried over in her voice. “You have pretty markings on your cheeks,” she agreed. InuYasha frowned. She could see Toga's crests? “What's your name?”

The young youkai's chin lifted proudly. InuYasha blinked in instant recognition. He'd always thought that even though Toga was named after Sesshoumaru and InuYasha's father—Toga's grandfather—he more resembled Kagura in both looks and demeanor. Just then, however, he looked exactly like a small version of Sesshoumaru. “I am Inutaisho Toga, son of Sesshoumaru. Father says that my crests are inherited from my grandfather. His were blue, too. InuYasha is my uncle, but he's hanyou.” His tone left very little doubt that he thought hanyous were inferior to full youkai. Behind the tree, InuYasha grimaced. The boy sat down by Kagome's feet. “What's your name?”

“Kagome,” she supplied. “Should you be telling me that you're a youkai?”

Toga shrugged. “Father says that you're a powerful miko. Father said you battled Naraku and defeated him. Father says—”

“Your father apparently talks way too much,” InuYasha growled as he flopped down on Kagome's other side. Trying to look for signs that she'd recognized anything that Toga had just so eloquently stated, InuYasha couldn't tell if he was more relieved that she didn't seem to recognize the name ‘Naraku’ or more peeved that she hadn't seemed to understand any of it at all.

Kagome laughed. “A miko? I'm not a miko!”

The warning look that InuYasha sent the boy's way staved back whatever commentary the lad had begun to form. Toga looked duly befuddled, but let the subject drop. His golden eyes rose to lock with Kagome's after a moment, and InuYasha narrowed his gaze, almost afraid to hear what the pup would say next.

“She's sleeping. Aiko won't go to sleep for anyone but Mama.” Toga dug the heel of his shoe into the dirt in a way that struck InuYasha as a nervous gesture. “Could you put her down? You could play with us! Can't she, Uncle Yasha? I know she's a *girl*, but . . .”

InuYasha grinned despite himself. “I *guess*,” he allowed, making a show of his feigned reticence. Kagome made a face as she gently shifted Aiko to lay her down.

After checking the girl to make sure that she was still asleep, Kagome hooked her arms around her raised knees and scrunched up her shoulders. “What are we playing?”

Toga hopped up, arms waving wildly in excitement. At the last moment he remembered not to yell, but he smiled brightly when he said, “Can we play hide and seek?”

InuYasha didn't want to ask what the game was. Judging from the looks on both Kagome as well as Toga's faces, he was the only one who didn't know.

“I'll be `it' first,” Toga generously offered. He sank down by a rock and hid his face in his arms. “One . . . two . . . three . . .”

She reached down and grabbed InuYasha's hands, pulling until he stood. The dog growled low. Kagome didn't hear the noise. “Come on, InuYasha. We have to hide.”

InuYasha let Kagome lead him toward the trees. He still had no idea what sort of game this was, but as long as Kagome was willing to hold his hands, could he really complain?

She let go of his hands and waved in the direction of the forest. “Hurry up! Go hide!” She started toward a thicket of bushes. InuYasha followed her. “What are you doing?” she demanded as he knelt down beside her.

“Hiding,” he replied. “Ain't that what you said to do?”

Kagome opened her mouth to reply then snapped it closed again. “We're not supposed to hide together!” she complained though her tone wasn't irritated in the least.

“Who says?” he countered, feigning innocence. There was something to be said in favor of these children's games, he decided as he stared into Kagome's eyes. A slight flush crept over her cheeks, and he grinned, inordinately proud of himself for being the cause of the reaction. “You took the best spot.”

“There's a million other places you could have hidden, InuYasha,” she pointed out, her voice distracted, vague.

“Ready or not, here I come!” Toga yelled in the distance.

InuYasha's eyes dropped to Kagome's lips. Her flush deepened when she noticed where he was staring, and her lips fell open just slightly. “What now?” he asked softly.

He could sense the battle inside her, the war of her mind to drag her back to her senses while her instincts called out to her to kiss him. Her mind won the battle, though, and Kagome shot to her feet, calling over her shoulder as she broke into a run, "Now you've got to make it back before Toga tags you!"

InuYasha let his head fall back as his eyes squeezed closed. This game was going to kill him.

The dog growled beside him. He glanced down and patted her head. "What's wrong, Dammit?" he asked softly.

The dog's eyes looked sad. InuYasha nodded and sighed. "I know it," he remarked as he stood, peeking over the top of the bushes to look for Toga. The boy was running around trees nearby. "Come on," InuYasha whispered to the dog just before he broke into a run in the direction that Kagome had disappeared moments before.

"I got you!" Toga hollered with resounding glee as he threw his arms around InuYasha's right leg.

Kagome giggled as InuYasha and Toga emerged from the trees. "All right, pup. Let go. You got me."

Toga's arms tightened, forcing InuYasha to drag him around. Toga spotted Kagome and instantly let go of InuYasha's leg. He skittered over to her and dragged at her hands until she stood up. "Come on, Kagome! InuYasha's slow! He'll be `it' forever!"

Her gaze rose to lock with InuYasha's. "Keh!" he snorted as he flopped back against the tree, arms crossed over his chest. He closed his eyes. "One. Two. Three." He opened one eye to pin them with a pointed look. "Are you going to hide or not?" Kagome giggled again as he closed his eye. "Four. Five. Six . . ."

He heard the two run off. Toga's excitement was a palpable thing. InuYasha hid his smile as he kept counting.

When he reached fifty, he set out quietly, intent on locating Kagome, wherever she was hiding. It didn't take him long to find her. His nose was attuned to her scent. She hid behind a small thicket of bushes not far from him. He could tell from scent alone that Toga was hiding further away. Ducking behind a large rock, InuYasha peeked around it. Kagome stood on her knees looking carefully over the bushes. That he'd circled around gave him the advantage, though, and InuYasha deliberately squelched the voice inside his head that told him that he was cheating, using his uncanny senses to locate the others. The dog beside him whined. InuYasha waved a hand to silence her.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he dragged Kagome back against his chest with a triumphant smile. "Caught you," he murmured in her ear.

She gasped softly and craned her neck to stare up at him. Her heart thumped so loudly that for a moment, it was all he could hear. As though her heartbeat had become his own, he felt the pulse synchronize in his chest as he tightened his hold on her.

“That's not fair,” she said though her tone lacked the accusing tone it should have held.

“Everything's fair in the chase,” he remarked. Eyes falling to her neck, he could see her pulse fluttering like a caged animal. He rubbed her skin with the pads of his thumbs through the thin material of her blouse. She shivered and pressed back against him.

“InuYasha . . .”

“Shh,” he whispered, his lips brushing over hers. Her eyes fell closed as her breath caught. Her body went limp in his arms, and he supported her, cradled her, held her close as he kissed her.

She turned to face him, as though she needed the contact with him as desperately as he needed hers. He sat back and pulled her into his lap, his lips never leaving hers. She sighed against his mouth, the sound soft, muffled. Her hands rose to cup his face, and he growled. The sensations coursing through him bordered on pain, delicious pleasure that nearly undid him.

Slowly at first, and then with more daring, Kagome returned the kiss. Her lips opened and closed under his like the wings of a hummingbird, asking for whatever he was willing to give her, and what he was willing to give was all of his heart. He discovered that nibbling at her lower lip made her shudder. Tracing the same lip with the tip of his tongue made her moan. Her reactions became his, and he wasn't sure anymore where she ended and he began. The only thing that made sense was that Kagome was there, in his arms, and that was exactly where she should be.

“*Eww!* What are you *doing*? You're acting like Father and Mama!”

InuYasha very nearly lost his temper at the youngster, who stood over them with a very real air of disgust as he eyed Kagome and InuYasha. He drew a deep breath to settle his nerves and shot the boy a glare. “And what are you doing, sneaking up on us like that?” he asked tightly.

The boy did a fair imitation of InuYasha's `keh!' “Is Kagome `it' now?”

InuYasha looked down at Kagome, who was still cradled against his chest. Her expression held an odd mix of confusion, embarrassment, and blatant regret, and he wondered why. When she noticed his look, she sat up quickly, nearly falling off his lap.

He caught her before she slipped. But the action brought her hip flush against him. He stifled the low moan that started to escape him at the nearly painful contact. The dog beside him growled. “Dammit,” he said, casting the dog a quelling look. The dog instantly stopped though she retained her guarded pose.



## ~Chapter 21~

### ~Confusion in Memories~

Kagome rolled over in bed and stared at the ceiling with a marked frown. *'If the answers to my troubles were written there,'* she thought as she made a face, *'I'd be happy.'*

She ought to be happy, shouldn't she? She'd just spent the better portion of the weekend with InuYasha, and that alone should make her deliriously pleased. Yet she couldn't even muster a smile. Why was that?

InuYasha's kisses . . .

With a frustrated sigh, Kagome rolled again and smashed her face into a pillow. He had told her that he loved another, hadn't he? InuYasha's words echoed through her mind. *'She . . . she forgot about me, about us.'*

And still, he kissed *her*. Why?

There weren't any answers, as far as Kagome could tell. There were only more and more questions; questions that InuYasha made her forget when he was close to her, when he kissed her.

The memories of those kisses were enough to make her blush. As though someone could see into her mind, Kagome protected those memoirs with a viciousness that surprised her. Was she so afraid that someone would come and take the recollections? She gasped softly and sat up, holding the blanket to her chest as though to reign in her wildly thumping heart. That *was* what she feared. But why?

A sudden chill raced up her spine. Kagome rubbed the goose bumps off her arms. Almost a sense of déjà vu, echoes in her mind, confusion warred with the truths that she knew. Why would she feel like someone had taken her memories before? Like the same person had the power to do it again? A disturbing sense that she wasn't completely whole welled up inside her. Kagome tried to push the idea aside.

The only time she felt truly complete was when she was with InuYasha. Why was that? He had walked her home after Sesshoumaru came for the children. As she left him to go in the shrine, she had felt as though every step she took made a small piece of her heart fall away . . . Why was it that every time she left him, she felt like she'd never see him again?

Just last night she'd been in his house, in his bed. Kagome frowned. *`How did I get there? I fell asleep in that chair . . .'* Slowly, it came back to her. He'd lifted her out of the chair, had carried her over to the bed. He laid her down, gently, carefully, as though he hadn't wanted to wake her. She had opened her eyes long enough to see him smiling down at her in the moonlit room. Had she smiled back? Yes, she had, and then he had kissed her. With a touch that was almost like the draw of a feather over her lips, he had kissed her. The memory was enough to set off an explosion of tremors in her belly, a heat that suffused through her body.

As quickly as the image came, it was replaced by another one. She sat in a hot spring with a girl she didn't recognize but felt as though she ought to. *`Have you told him how you feel, Kagome?'*

Kagome studiously avoided the other girl's probing gaze. *`How can I? Every time I start to, he runs off after her.'*

*`But—'*

*`I'll tell him when you tell Miroku how you feel.'*

The other girl fell silent, obviously as unwilling to admit her true feelings to Miroku as Kagome was to admit her feelings to . . . who? The vision faded, and Kagome blinked in sudden confusion. What was that all about, and who was that girl?

"Sango," Kagome whispered into the quiet room. The name struck a chord deep inside, and Kagome gasped softly. Sango . . . Miroku . . . They were her friends . . . But where were they now?

*`Nothing makes sense!' she railed, punching her fists into her pillow though garnering no real comfort from the action. Not one little bit of it made any sense to her at all.*

With a disgusted sigh, Kagome flopped back, her breath escaping in a whoosh. Who was this woman he loved? What if her wish came true and this woman came back to him, remembered him? What then? The thought of what would inevitably happen was enough to force her soul to whimper. Kagome turned onto her side, curling up with her knees against her chest as an unpleasant hurt unfurled inside her.

*`But he isn't mine, not really. Is he?'* she asked herself as tears welled in her eyes. She blinked in an effort to force them back. It didn't work. A tear slipped from each of her eyes, snaking silvery trails in the moonlight.

The muted knock on her window made her jump. Kagome quickly dashed a hand across her eyes to hide the evidence of her tears. She sat up, surprised to see InuYasha kneeling on the roof outside her room. She stumbled across the floor and threw open the window. "InuYasha? Is everything all right?"

He opened his mouth to speak but stopped, his head tilting to the side so that the moonlight filtered past him and lit her face. His expression was nearly hidden in shadows but she could see

the glow of his eyes, the twisting of his eyebrows that showed his concern. With a hesitant finger, he reached out and traced the path the tear had coursed down her cheek.

Kagome caught his hand and tugged gently. Instead of stepping into her room, though, he pulled her toward the window and out onto the roof. She squeaked as she glanced over the edge of the roof at the ground so far below. He caught her and held her. She immediately relaxed. Even here, where she could easily slip and fall, did she trust that he would never let that happen to her?

She did, she realized with a sudden lurch of her heart. She absolutely, completely, undeniably trusted him. He pulled her back away from the edge and sat down only to drag her into his lap after he settled against the window outcropping. She rested her head in the crook of his shoulder, the soft material of his shirt soothing her. "Why did you come?" she asked softly, struggling to stay awake. *'Being held so close to InuYasha is entirely too nice,'* she thought with a vague smile.

InuYasha sighed. It was more of a deep exhalation than a show of emotion, and she smiled as she felt his lips on her forehead and snuggled closer to his chest. *'He's as content to stay here like this as you are,'* her mind told her. Her smile widened.

"I couldn't stay away," he admitted. "I felt like I needed to be near you."

"I'm glad you came," she assured him, snuggling closer to him.

He hugged her tighter. "Will you tell me why you were crying?"

She made a face and sat up, wrapping her arms around her knees. The loss of his warmth made her shiver slightly but she stubbornly refused to be drawn back to him. He waited patiently for her answer. "I wondered about this woman who forgot you. What happened?" InuYasha was staring at her. She could feel his eyes probing her head, like he was trying to read her mind. She fought the urge to fidget under his close scrutiny. "If you don't want to tell me, I understand," Kagome said quietly.

He shook his head, sighed heavily. He looked away, as though he couldn't bear to look at Kagome when he answered. "She thought there was someone else," he replied, his tone clipped, angry. The raw hurt behind his words tore at her heart, ripped at her soul. "She did something stupid, and then she forgot about me."

"What did she do?" Kagome pressed though she was afraid to hear his answer.

"Keh!" InuYasha snorted. "Nothing. It was just stupid."

Kagome sighed softly. "If it was stupid, then why does it hurt you?"

He didn't look as though he was going to answer. He stared off into the distance with an intense glower. Was he looking for answers that he couldn't find, either? "I ask myself why she doubted

me. I ask myself what I could have done differently so that she might have stayed with me. I'd ask her, if I could."

A lump welled up in Kagome's throat. In that moment, in that instant, she could feel how much InuYasha loved this faceless woman, this one who had somehow hurt him. Was she simply being selfish? What sort of reason did she have, for doing this to him? Blinking back a wash of tears, Kagome forced herself to ask him, "Then what are you doing with me? If you love her, shouldn't you go find her?"

Against her better judgment, she let him draw her back against him. Stubbornly refusing to let her tears fall, Kagome bit her bottom lip and waited for his answer. "Don't be an idiot. I'm here with you because I want to be, because you . . . you make me happier than I deserve to be."

She shook her head slowly in confusion. She felt as though her heart was being crushed. Why did he say such things to her when it was painfully obvious that he still loved this other woman? "And if she suddenly remembers you?"

InuYasha let his forehead drop against hers. His eyes were closed but his heart was there in his voice when he spoke. "Then I'll still be here with you, Kagome. I promise you."

She wanted to believe him. He sounded so earnest, so true . . . could she afford to believe him? A small cry escaped her as she thought of the alternative, of a life without InuYasha. The thought of it hurt even more than the idea that he might love someone else. She couldn't afford *not* to believe him.

His hands rubbed her arms, and he leaned back slightly, a thoughtful frown furrowing his brow. "Come on. You're cold." Dragging her to her feet, InuYasha carefully lifted her and carried her back to the window. He didn't set her down until he reached her bed. Then he sank down beside her and pulled her close.

"You can't stay!" Kagome pointed out.

InuYasha kissed her gently. She was rational enough to realize that he had done so to shut her up. She was bemused enough not to care. "I'll go after you're asleep," he told her.

She snuggled closer, enjoying the warmth that radiated from him to surround her. "Okay," she agreed. "InuYasha?"

"Hmm?"

"Will you tell me more about the Shikon Jewel?"

Idly, he wrapped her hair around his hand. His sigh told her that he didn't want to. But his voice was low, soft, soothing when he spoke. "It took them a long time to find all the shards. There were a few that they couldn't get back, though. A wolf youkai had a couple of them in his

scrawny legs. The slayer's brother had one in his back that kept him alive. But the rest, they gathered and saved . . . The first priestess though, had been brought back to life—”

“How?”

He sighed. “A witch who was versed in the dark arts resurrected her by making a clay body out of grave soil and the priestess' remains. Anyway, the first priestess took the shards from the second and gave them to the evil one. She wanted to destroy him and the jewel together, you see?”

Kagome sighed, her expression bleak. “It must have been hard for him, to have his first love resurrected like that.”

She felt his lips on her forehead. “Not so hard as it was to see how much it upset the second priestess. The hanyou hated to hurt her like that.”

Remembering what he had said before, about loving them both, Kagome smiled sadly. “Because he loved her, too?”

“Because he loved her *more*.”

She digested that with a small smile before asking, “And he protected her, didn't he?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“I wonder if he had cute ears, like yours? If he did, I don't think the second priestess could have helped herself. She'd *have* to love him . . .”

“I don't think it was his ears,” InuYasha grumbled. Kagome could tell from his disgruntled tone that he was blushing.

“I love how you tell this story. It's like I can see it . . . Like you're the hanyou, and I'm . . .”

“You're what?”

She missed the breathless quality behind his voice. She giggled self-consciously. “Well, like I'm the second priestess, the one he protected. Sound stupid?”

He squeezed her tighter. “Not at all.”

“Do you think they stayed together? After they destroyed the evil? The stories I hear never really say . . .”

He sighed softly. “What do you think?”



## ~Chapter 22~

### ~Osuwari~

'What a beautiful day!' Kagome thought as she briskly walked through the forest with the bag swinging casually at her side. She was in such good spirits that she was hard-pressed not to sing. The cakes she had carefully packed would be a treat for InuYasha, and Kagome was certain that he would love them.

*InuYasha.*

His name alone was enough to bring a smile to Kagome's lips. The last week at school had been difficult. Whenever she saw him, she wanted to run to him, to throw herself into his arms, and he had looked as though he would have liked it, too. In class, it had been difficult to concentrate on her tasks because he was there, always watching her. If the other students knew what was going on, they didn't show it.

But Kagome knew, and that was enough to make her blush whenever she caught his gaze. Once, she'd been trying to do a parallel bar routine but had slipped off. InuYasha caught her, and as he had let go, his claws had grazed over her belly, those remarkable eyes of his sweeping over her, making her want to kiss him. She'd nearly melted on the spot, and it was only after the fact that she had been grateful that no one else had caught that exchange.

He'd slept at her house every night since last weekend. After he'd tapped on her window in the night, she'd been mortified when her mother had opened her door the next morning only to find her and InuYasha curled up in each other's arms. Mama had smiled in her gentle way and had amazed Kagome by asking if InuYasha wanted his eggs scrambled or over-easy.

Kagome grinned as she recalled InuYasha's words before he had darted out the back door to run home to change his clothes in time for school.

Shifting nervously from one foot to the other, he didn't look at her as he cleared his throat and said, "Hey, uh, Kagome? Just leave your window unlocked. I'll let myself in."

Afraid to face her mother, Kagome stood frozen to the spot as InuYasha took off out the door. Mama's laughter broke through Kagome's shock, and when she was finally able to muster up the courage to look at Mrs. Higurashi, Kagome hadn't missed the knowing look her mother had sent her way. "Mama?" she asked, worried that her mother had somehow lost her mind.

“I’ll get a key made for him today,” her mother remarked before heading out of the room to wash the breakfast dishes. “We wouldn’t want him to hurt himself, climbing in and out of your window, would we?”

After that it was a foregone conclusion that he would be there when she fell asleep, and he would be there when she woke. It was a wonderful feeling. It was almost *too* nice.

It baffled her, though. As much as she loved having InuYasha close, as much as she adored the tender way he always held her close, the way he kissed her, the contact always left her wanting a little more. She’d seen it in his eyes, too, the desire to be closer, to move beyond the innocent kisses. It was as if there was something preventing him from pushing her too fast or too far, and as much as she appreciated his concern, a deeper part of her wished that he’d . . . *‘Don’t finish that thought, Kagome,’* her mind rebuked. *‘Making love is a huge thing to you. Maybe . . . maybe it is to him, too.’*

Still, there were little things, hints of yearning that she caught from him. The way his eyes darkened to a shocking topaz spoke to her. She didn’t miss his soft sighs, his low moans. He’d kiss her, and she’d feel a rising excitement shooting through his body, as though it took everything inside him to contain what she made him feel.

Last night, as he held her, he asked her, “Kagome, tell me what you want?”

She nestled closer and smiled as the inviting tug of sleep closed in on her. “I want to touch the moon,” she whispered.

“What does that mean?”

She yawned, drawing together enough coherence to tell him, “Grandpa used to tell us this story. He said that a mighty prince once set out to find his princess but he didn’t know where, exactly, to look for her. He would know it was her because she would remind him of the comfort of his youth and a girl he used to know. He searched everywhere but never found her until one night, as he lay awake, he promised the moon that he would give anything, if he could only find his true love, his princess . . .”

InuYasha’s rumbling nearly soothed her into sleep. He kissed her forehead and squeezed her gently. “And did he find her?”

Kagome forced her eyes open, willing herself to stay awake long enough to finish her story. Idly twirling silvery hair around her finger, she leaned up to kiss his cheek. “The moon watched over him, night after night he dreamed of this girl he used to know, his best childhood friend. When he came to this village, he saw a girl who looked like the one from his dreams, and he asked her to marry him. She said yes. He should have been happy but he wasn’t. That night, the young prince couldn’t sleep, so he wandered outside to stare at the moon. It was then that he realized that he’d not been searching for the girl he’d asked to marry him. He’d been searching for the woman in the moon, the quiet voice that whispered to him every night. He wished to touch the moon.”

InuYasha's gaze seemed far away, as though he understood what the young man in the story was looking for. Kagome grinned, smoothing the hair off the hanyou's face. He caught her hand and kissed her fingers. "So what happened?"

Kagome's smile faltered. It was the part of the story that she hated, the ending. "Nothing. An ordinary man can't touch the moon."

"That's funny," InuYasha whispered, stroking her hair, rubbing her cheek with his infinitely gentle fingers. "I'm touching the moon right now."

His words made her heart ache with emotion so great that she didn't think she could contain them all. "InuYasha . . ."

He pulled her to him, kissed her gently, held her close as warm moonlight filtered through the window. "Go to sleep, Kagome." Rumbling filled the quiet bedroom. Kagome smiled as a single tear slipped down her cheek. "I'll be here when you wake up."

The sound of splashing water shook Kagome out of her reverie. She frowned in confusion but kept moving. All was as it should be in the clearing behind InuYasha's house. Was the sound coming from the pond?

As she stepped out of the trees and into the bright sunlight, Kagome gasped sharply. The white dog had been laying in the middle of the path, sunning herself but when Kagome approached, she rose up to block her path. Then she bared her teeth and growled viciously. Kagome retreated a step.

The dog stepped toward Kagome, her growl growing more and more menacing as she closed in. Kagome backed up. Where was InuYasha?

If she didn't think that the animal would chase her, Kagome would have taken off. As it was, she came up flush against a tree and gasped softly. The dog advanced closer. Kagome wondered if she really would bite her.

The dog crouched low to the ground, ready to spring. Kagome closed her eyes and screamed the only word that came to mind. "*Osuwari!*"

The growling suddenly stopped. A deafening crash rang through the clearing. A groan that sounded unnervingly familiar echoed in her ears. Slowly, Kagome opened her eyes again. The dog had run off and was standing over InuYasha, who was sprawled out flat, face down on the ground. Kagome's hand shot up to cover her mouth as she gasped, eyes widening as she wondered exactly what had happened. Her feet started forward, seemingly of their own accord. She reached his side quickly, ignoring the warning growls issuing from the dog as she sank down beside him.

InuYasha leaned up, a comical look of confusion clouding his features. He looked slightly irritated yet there was a trace of something else in his visage. Kagome's frown deepened. Why would he feel relieved?

“What happened to you?”

“Keh!” His expression darkened, and he snorted. “What do you mean, what happened to me? *You* happened to me! *You* said *that* word!”

Kagome shook her head in confusion as she struggled to remember what it was she might have said to cause this. “What word? The only thing I said was, ‘*osuw—*’ ”

“Don’t say it again!” he yelled. He started to get up then seemed to think better of it. He flushed and let himself flop back onto his stomach before pinning her with a pointed look. Kagome stared at him as embarrassed realization washed over her. He was . . . *naked*?

Her eyes lingered on the muscled back, the fine sculpting of his satiny looking flesh as it tapered to his waist. If she reached out to touch him, would his skin be as soft as it looked? With a shocked gasp at her own thoughts, Kagome jerked her head to the side a moment too late. She’d seen InuYasha’s expression. It was a mixture of embarrassment, irritation, amusement, and something that she couldn’t quite identify but that set her body off in delicious little tremors. He *knew* she’d been shamelessly eyeing him.

She could feel her face explode in crimson fire. “I-I-I should have c-c-c-called before I came over,” she stammered as she hastily shot to her feet and turned to flee.

“Kagome! Wait!”

She stopped but refused to turn to look at him. As comfortable as she had become around him, she still wasn’t ready to see . . . well . . . that *much* of him. The sound of his movements drifted to her. Seconds later she heard him rustling around with something, then he touched her shoulder, and she yelped. He pulled her wrist to turn her around, and she saw, to her relief, that he had retrieved his towel. “Don’t go?” he asked, an urgency in his tone that erased whatever nervousness that might have otherwise lingered in her.

The dog growled again. She tried to nudge Kagome aside. When Kagome reached down to pet her, she bared her teeth and snarled. With a smothered gasp, Kagome jerked her hand back and took an unconscious step in retreat.

InuYasha looked fit to kill. His gaze settled on the dog, and the growl that came out of him silenced her immediately. Kagome stepped away again. “Dammit, what the hell do you think you’re doing?” he said, his tone level, even, though Kagome could sense the underlying rage in his voice.

The dog’s head dropped a notch.

“Don’t do that again,” he warned. “I mean it, Dammit.”

It struck Kagome as unusual, the way he said the curse word. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion as understanding dawned on her. “InuYasha, you didn’t . . . did you *name* that dog Dammit?”

He shot her an almost guilty look but shook his head in denial. “Of course not! I didn’t name her at all. She already had one.”

Kagome’s confusion deepened. “If she already had one, then why don’t you return her to her owners?”

InuYasha snorted indelicately and planted his hands on his hips as he stared at her as though she ought to know as much. “Keh! She has a name, yes. *Everyone* has a name. She doesn’t have an *owner*. You can’t ‘own’ a dog; it’s degrading. Anyway, she said her name is Dammit.”

“You can *talk* to her?” Kagome flinched at the unintentional caution in her tone. She could only hope he hadn’t caught it.

“I’m not a pup, bitch,” he ground out. “I’m half *dog* youkai, remember? Dammit doesn’t talk, but she *did* tell me her name.”

“I didn’t realize that being half *dog* youkai allowed you to *speak* with dogs, InuYasha,” Kagome remarked tightly. “And *what* did you call me?”

He glowered at her. The look reminded Kagome of a pouting child. She wisely kept that observation to herself though. “I didn’t mean it that way,” he grumbled.

She was surprised to see his shoulders slump, and his chin drop. She tried not to let his reaction bother her. But when his ears flatten against his head, as though he was upset by her outburst, Kagome’s anger disappeared completely.

She supposed that was as close to an actual apology as she was going to get out of him. She hitched the back pack strap up on her shoulder and remembered the cakes in her bag. With a sigh, she lowered the bag and dug out the treats. “Here,” she said, thrusting the plate at him. “I made these for you.”

He looked momentarily surprised but took the plate she offered. She watched in disguised amusement as his ears perked back up, just a little. “Thanks,” he said softly as Kagome closed up the bag and swung it back over her shoulder.

“I’ll see you later, InuYasha,” she said as she turned to go.

“Kagome, wait! I . . . I need you . . . err . . . your *help*. With my hair. I can’t wash it very well. Alone. Without you.”



Kagome's mouth fell open as her brows drew together in chagrin. "Don't make me out to be the villain!" she complained. "It's a known fact. If you don't believe me, ask a vet—*any vet!*"

InuYasha didn't bother to comment on that. Instead he picked up the plate and headed into the house. As he opened the glass doors, he picked up the pace. Kagome heard the faint trill of the telephone.

She caught Dammit's stare and flinched at the accusing in the animal's eyes. "Don't look at me that way! Chocolate really *is* bad for you, I didn't make that up!" Cautiously, Kagome reached out to pet the dog's head. Dammit ducked away and growled.

Kagome frowned. That dog really hated her. Her hand dropped away, and she sighed.

InuYasha stepped back outside and shut the door before handing Kagome a can of soda. "Thanks," she said as he slipped his hand around the can and popped it open for her. He sank down on his haunches behind her and rested his chin on her shoulder. "It's beautiful," Kagome remarked softly, her eyes shining as she watched the sun sinking lower.

"Yeah," he agreed, "it is." Kagome turned her head at the wistfulness in his voice. He was staring intently at her. A pleasant lurch in her belly erupted, and Kagome leaned forward to kiss him.

He seemed surprised as their lips touched. She heard him set his can aside just before his arms wrapped around her, drawing her back against him. He sank back and pulled her closer, and she turned to wrap her arms around his neck, holding him tightly. As though she was afraid to let him go, she whimpered softly when he drew his lips away from hers. He fluttered kisses on the end of her nose, over her eyelids, across her cheeks. Then he sighed and hugged her, nestling her against him and rocking her gently in his arms.

*'Does he feel this?'* she wondered. *'This sensation of complete contentment? This feeling that we belong together?'* She smiled to herself. More and more often lately she'd been thinking about what it would be like, to spend a lifetime with InuYasha . . . The thoughts were almost too nice.

Kagome sighed, too, but for completely different reasons, she supposed. As much as she loved being here with him, it was getting late, and her mother was probably getting worried. She savored the feel of being held in his arms for another few minutes, though, before she leaned away enough to see his face.

"I'd better get home," she explained with an apologetic look.

InuYasha shook his head and pulled her back against him. "Your mom called. I told her you'd stay here tonight . . . unless you don't want to?"

*'Why did he have to sound so broken when he'd said that?'* she wondered. Even if she had wanted to go home, how could she, after hearing the sadness in his voice? All she wanted was to



## ~Chapter 23~

### ~Echoes of the Past~

“I still don’t think you should be making me dinner. You’re the one who should be celebrating, not cooking,” InuYasha pointed out with a decisive snort. Arms crossed over his chest, the hanyou looked sorely affronted that she would be flitting about making his meal.

“I want to do this,” Kagome replied as she dug out a cookie sheet to put the rolls on for baking. “Besides that, my mom would have been upset if we had gone out to dinner without them, too.”

“Well, she’s got a point. It isn’t every day you finish school, is it?”

Kagome stopped her task long enough to shoot him a quick grin. “I know. Weird, isn’t it? I can’t believe I’ve graduated.”

He shrugged with what he hoped was convincing nonchalance. “You decided against going to the university?”

Kagome slipped the rolls into the oven and carefully stirred the contents of the wok. “Well, I thought maybe I’d take some classes at the junior college and stick closer to home.”

It relieved him to know that Kagome wasn’t thinking of leaving home to study further. If that was what she’d wanted, he would have had to find a reason to go with her, especially if she had chosen to attend a school further away. That she hadn’t . . . He’d just consider himself lucky and leave it at that.

“Can I help with anything?” he offered slowly.

Kagome stopped and eyed him with a slight frown. “I can get it,” she said. She moved around the kitchen with remarkable ease. InuYasha couldn’t help but appreciate it. “I want to do this.”

“Kagome . . .”

She shoed him out of the kitchen with a wave of her hands. Dammit made a noise suspiciously close to a snort. Kagome either didn’t notice or just didn’t care to comment on it. “Go sit down. Everything will be ready in a little bit.”

With a heavy sigh designed to tell her that he was only doing so because she asked him to, InuYasha crossed over to the fireplace to drop another log on the small flame. He sank down on a cushion to wait. Dammit lay down beside him.

InuYasha stared down at the dog with a thoughtful frown. Though she'd behaved herself well enough around Kagome since the osuwari incident, InuYasha still didn't understand what had come over the dog at the time. *'Hur-r-r-rt, hur-r-r-r-rt,'* was all he had been able to discern from her. Had the dog thought that Kagome's inadvertent use of the incantation had hurt him? Irritated him, maybe. Embarrassed him, sure. But hurt him? "Keh!"

*'Is that what you thought? You gotta be joking! Kagome can't hurt me,'* he thought as he stared down into the dog's eyes.

Dammit stared back with a sad expression. *'Much hur-rt Lor-rd Dog's hear-rt.'*

InuYasha shook his head, his scowl darkening considerably. In the weeks since she'd come to live with him, he'd slowly come to realize that Dammit could talk to him like this, in an abridged way. She didn't know many human words. Most of the time, however, she was able to tell him enough that he understood.

Kagome hummed softly as she finished up supper. With a twinge of recognition, InuYasha realized that it was the same song that she'd whistle or sing while she made dinner with Sango. The dull ache in his heart that never seemed to go away intensified with the poignant memory. InuYasha closed his eyes for a moment against the emotion.

*'Anyway, you'd best behave yourself. Kagome's here for good.'*

Dammit snorted but didn't reply.

InuYasha reached over and dragged his briefcase closer. Kagome was still busy preparing dinner. He might as well do something constructive. Digging out the brochures from the local college, he leafed through them, frowning as he stared at the course listings. Though he'd picked up the booklets for Kagome, he also couldn't help but think maybe he ought to consider taking some classes, himself. He couldn't be a substitute teacher forever, now could he?

Kagome set a plate of food down on the low table beside him. She handed him a set of chopsticks and returned to the kitchen to retrieve her plate as he stowed the booklets away again. To his surprise, he saw that she came back with two more plates. She set one down on the floor by the dog before settling down at the end of the table opposite him.

They ate in silence. Dammit, InuYasha noticed, wouldn't touch the food that Kagome had given her. He stifled a sigh, deciding that he would have to have another talk with the animal later.

Kagome pushed her food around and occasionally ate a bite. For the most part, she only picked at hers. He set his chopsticks aside and scooted toward her. "What's wrong?"

She set down her utensils and smiled. It looked more like a grimace. "Why do you get that look on your face? Why do you look so lonely?" She cupped his cheek in her small hand; she stared

into his face as though she was trying to read his mind. “It’s that girl, isn’t it? The one who forgot you?”

He wanted to reassure her. He wanted to tell her that *she* was that girl. Her eyes were pained, sad. *‘If only she would remember . . .’*

Her head bowed. He hated that he couldn’t see the emotions she couldn’t hide from him. He resisted the urge to lift her chin, to make her look him in the eye, to dare her to lie to him.

Kagome drew a deep, ragged breath. “It’s all right. You don’t have to say. I see it in your eyes sometimes; when you think I’m not looking . . .” She and forced a smile that was only a shadow of the genuine emotion. InuYasha flinched at the suspicious brightness behind her gaze. “If she came back . . . if she remembered . . .” She swallowed hard. Her bottom lip trembled. Still she smiled. InuYasha’s chest constricted painfully, fully aware of what it was costing her to say what it was she was trying to say. “I know you’ve said you’d stay with me, but if she came back, if she made you happy . . . I’d want you to be with *her*.”

InuYasha started to reach for Kagome. She drew away from him and reached behind her neck, working the clasp on the chain that she always wore. She stared at the dormant pink orb on the necklace for a long moment. Then with a smile that closer resembled what a smile should be, she dropped the jewel into his hand.

“I don’t know where I got that. I feel like I’ve had it forever. When I felt sad or lonely, just touching it made me feel better.” She took the chain and leaned over his shoulder to work the clasp. When she sat back, she reached over, her fingers idly touching the jewel before she sighed and said, “I want you to have it because . . .”

She didn’t finish her sentence. She didn’t have to. He had always wanted to make her feel like that—safe, secure, happy—but he hadn’t known how. And now . . . now that she couldn’t remember him . . . he’d finally succeeded. He only hoped that it wouldn’t be too late.

InuYasha clasped the jewel in his palm. It was still warm. She’d given it to him, and she didn’t know? In one movement, he dragged her forward into his embrace, crushing her to him with a fierce protectiveness that he rarely showed her. Normally too afraid that he would hurt her, he had refrained from doing it before. Kagome gasped softly but hugged him back, her own strength surprising and comforting at the same time. “Stay with me, Kagome.”

He didn’t see her frown but he felt her body tense in his arms. He leaned away to look down at her face, and he puzzled over the odd look in her expression. “Kagome?”

She looked a million miles away, and the confusion in her eyes tore at him, raked at him, left him raw and bleeding in places that no eye would ever see. “You’ve said that to me before,” she whispered, shaking her head as though it made no sense to her. “You did, didn’t you?”

InuYasha gently drew her back against him, smoothed her hair under his hands. He never answered her question. He wasn't sure how to do it without telling her too much, without explaining things that couldn't be explained. "I have something for you, too," he said.

Kagome straightened up and leaned forward, her eyes brightening in anticipation. "What?"

He chuckled. In the past, she'd always given them things—treats from her time, things that she thought would please them. How often had she returned from her visits home with candy or crayons for Shippou, with makeup and soaps that smelled nice for Sango? How many sodas and treats had she given Miroku? How often had she thought to bring him ramen or potato chips?

With a sharp pang of guilt, he realized that he'd never really given her anything. *'But it wasn't as though I'd never thought of it,'* he reasoned. *'There just wasn't anything that was good enough to give her.'* He got up to retrieve the plainly wrapped gift. "I'm not good at wrapping things," he remarked with an inward flinch as he handed her the package and sank back down on his cushion to wait. "Sorry."

Her already bright smile widened as she lifted her eyes to stare through her lashes at him. "It's perfect."

For some reason, watching her slowly open the package did little to alleviate InuYasha's anxiety. He asked himself again if he had chosen the right thing. It was the one thing that he had that she might one day understand. It was the only thing he had that meant enough to give her.

Her brow furrowed in confusion as the paper fell away. InuYasha dug his claws into the cushion and waited for her to speak. "What is this?" she asked finally, lifting the fire rat robe to stare at it.

InuYasha sighed, shoving aside the ill-placed feelings of sadness. He had hoped . . . "It's a family heirloom," he explained. "My father gave it to my mother, and she gave it to me. She said I should give it to the one I want to protect."

Kagome's gaze dropped back to the garments in amazement, in wonder, as though she didn't dare believe what he had said. "You want *me* to have it? Are you sure?"

InuYasha made a face. "It's not fancy," he grumbled. "It was a stupid thought. I'll take you tomorrow and get whatever you want, okay?"

The gift slid off her lap as she launched herself into his arms. He blinked in surprise but hugged her back. "What, exactly, will you protect me from?" she asked softly, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

InuYasha kissed her forehead as a stuttering warmth grew stronger in his chest until he felt like he wanted to laugh. He didn't, but he did smile. Curiously, he felt tears prick the back of his eyes. He blinked them away and had to clear his throat before he could answer her.



## ~~Chapter 24~~

### ~Housewarming~

InuYasha rolled his eyes and heaved a heavy sigh. “Do we have to do this?” he complained.

Kagome flashed him a grin as she brushed past him to go into the store. He made a face but followed, letting the door close slowly behind them. “If you get a few things you like for your house, you’ll be more comfortable there,” she stated. “It’s a fact.”

“I don’t see why you couldn’t just get some stuff you like,” he grumbled. “You’re there as much as I am.”

Kagome started browsing through some art prints, and her answer was distracted. “But it isn’t my house.”

“Might as well be.”

The only outward show that she’d heard him at all was the slight pause as she flipped through the prints. She smiled to herself. When InuYasha pouted, he reminded her so much of a child. She shot him a surreptitious glance. Leaning against the wall with his ankles and arms crossed and a bored expression on his face, she very nearly laughed at him.

A sudden flash of memory shot through her mind: InuYasha, wearing the red outfit he’d given her for her graduation, leaning against the doorway of the old well-house at the shrine. She gasped softly. *What on earth?*

“I-InuYasha . . .?”

His mulish expression cleared when he saw her face. He smoothed the bangs out of her face as he stared at her with a concerned frown. “What’s wrong?”

She forced out a weak laugh and shook her head. Her imagination had to be running away with her. That was all. There wasn’t any real reason to worry InuYasha, was there? “Nothing. I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine,” he remarked. “Maybe this was a bad idea.”

She caught his hand as he started to head out of the store. “No, really! I’m fine! Come on. Let’s look around a little more.”

He didn't look as though he believed her, but he nodded curtly and let her lead him deeper into store.

She goaded him into selecting a few more cushions for the living room. He seemed to have a preoccupation with red. He chose a deep crimson banner to hang over the fireplace mantle, but only after she'd remarked that his antique sword would look beautiful on it. It seemed as though the few things that he owned took precedence in his mind, and if she lingered too long staring at something that she liked in particular, he wasted no time in buying it. She grinned. He seemed to care more for things she would like than he did with things of his own choosing.

Most of the items, though, were larger and would have to be delivered. Still, by the time they were finished looking around that department, InuYasha's arms were full and his scowl was back in place.

"I thought I smelled your stench, little brother."

InuYasha growled and narrowed his eyes as Sesshoumaru stepped in front of them. Holding Aiko in his arms and with Kagura and Toga beside him, Kagome couldn't help but stare between the brothers with a large dose of trepidation. They looked as though they couldn't stand one another. Well, InuYasha looked as though he hated Sesshoumaru. Sesshoumaru, on the other hand, looked as though InuYasha was nothing more than a bit of lint on his immaculate suit.

"See, Kagome? I knew that this was a bad idea," InuYasha growled though loud enough for Sesshoumaru to hear him. "I thought you were hiding at your beach house, bastard. Or did you come back early just to give me hell?"

"Don't flatter yourself, InuYasha. Kagura had a few things she needed to take care of."

"Will you two stop it?" Kagura cut in. "You behave like common mongrels, I swear."

Aiko whined and shoved at Sesshoumaru with one hand while reaching out toward Kagome with her other. Sesshoumaru looked mildly disturbed at this but he let Kagome take the girl. She leaned to the side and looked down when the little hand tugged at her blouse. Toga smiled shyly, dancing from one foot to the other in an anxious sort of way. "Kagome, when can I come play with you and Uncle Yasha again?"

Before she could answer, InuYasha tweaked the boy's ear and spoke. "Any time you want, runt."

Kagome blinked in surprise at InuYasha's gruff show of affection for the boy. She wisely hid her amusement. Aiko played with Kagome's hair. The toddler's hair was so soft and fine it was like the down on a baby bird. The image of something white, something that looked incredibly soft . . . and Sesshoumaru? Dressed all in white except for his armor with a fluffy thing that wrapped over his arm and flowed behind him, Kagome knew it was him. But why was he dressed so archaically?

*Sesshoumaru held up the huge sword, Tokijin, pointing it at InuYasha's chest. "A hanyou should act like one! On—your—knees!" In a blinding flash of white light, InuYasha's body flew through the air and hit the ground as she screamed out his name.*

With a startled gasp, Kagome's eyes flew to Sesshoumaru's arm . . . The one that she didn't think ought to be there. Why did she think that he shouldn't have that arm?

Her shock went unnoticed as InuYasha and Sesshoumaru continued to toss insults back and forth.

Kagura sighed and shook her head before taking Toga's hand and gesturing at Kagome to follow. "They'll be at it for hours. We might as well get some tea," she remarked, jerking her head at the men, who were still trading verbal barbs.

Kagome bought ice cream for the children as Kagura bought tea. They sat down at a small table and Kagome giggled as Aiko stubbornly tried to feed herself. "Your children are so cute," she remarked.

Toga snorted. "Cute is for girls," he replied.

Kagura tweaked Toga's nose but addressed her commentary to Kagome. "Sometimes he is so much like his father, it's frightening." She fell silent as she stared at Kagome with a thoughtful frown. "Are you all right? You look a bit pale? Do you need to go home?"

Kagome took her time sipping her tea and forced a smile. "No, I'm fine, really."

Why couldn't she tell anyone about these weird things she saw? *'Because,'* she thought with an inward grimace, *'I'll sound crazy.'*

"Careful, InuYasha, lest I feel the need to beat you down," Sesshoumaru said as the two approached the table.

"Keh! I'd like to see you try!"

"Any time, anywhere."

"Oh yeah? How about my house, right now."

Kagura stood and began wiping off Aiko's face with a towelette. Toga whined when she did the same to him. "Mo-o-o-om!"

"See you both later," she said as Sesshoumaru lifted his daughter.

"You ready?" InuYasha asked, finally dragging his attention off his brother.

Kagome stood. "Sure."

They walked on in silence. Kagome tried not to think about those odd visions she'd had. What did it all mean? She sighed.

She paused at a window display of a baby store and sighed softly. InuYasha stopped beside her. "Kagome?"

"Can we go in here?"

"Keh. That stuff's all for babies. I don't need—"

"Oh, come on! It'll be fun!"

"But I don't *need* anything from in there."

Kagome frowned at InuYasha's bored tone. "Just to look," she remarked then stopped to stare thoughtfully at him with a slight frown. "Don't you *ever* want a family?"

He shrugged. "Never really gave it much thought."

Kagome shrugged and sighed softly. He flinched at the flicker of sadness that crossed her features. Her tone was falsely bright with an equally fake smile when she said, "You're right. You don't need anything in here. Let's—"

With a muffled gasp, Kagome was amazed as InuYasha grabbed her hand and practically dragged her into the store. His expression was slightly annoyed but when he intercepted her gaze, he smiled. "We're not *buying* anything, right?" he asked pointedly.

Kagome spun a small wooden top on the display counter. The brightly colored sides seemed to blend into one constant blur. A look of confusion filtered over her face. InuYasha frowned as the look of uncertainty was replaced with one of near sadness.

"Kagome?" he said, gently touching her shoulder.

She shook herself out of her reverie and blinked quickly to clear her vision. When she finally met his gaze, she smiled weakly. "Sorry. I must have been daydreaming."

He didn't believe her. There was something too melancholy in her eyes, as though whatever it was that she had just thought or seen had caused her very real distress. "Would you tell me the truth if I asked you what it was you were thinking just now?"

Kagome carefully blanked her expression. "It was nothing, InuYasha." Her eyes fell to the side before she added, "Really."

She laughed and wandered over to a display of baby comforters. She didn't look back to see if InuYasha had followed but she knew he had. He never let her get far from him. Her smile widened as she pulled down a cute pink comforter with fluffy bunnies dancing across it.

“Keh.”

“Excuse me,” a nearby young man said as he tried to bend over to retrieve his son's dropped rattle that rolled into Kagome's foot. The baby looked no more than a year old. Kagome hurriedly retrieved the toy and handed to the child. “Thank you.”

“It's fine,” Kagome said as she chattered to the baby. “He's so sweet!”

The man glanced from Kagome to InuYasha and smiled. “When are you two expecting?”

Kagome's flush was immediate and dark. InuYasha spoke first. His face was almost as red as Kagome's. “She's not . . . uh . . . we're not . . . *No!*” He saw the twinge of hurt in her expression and flinched inwardly as his ears twitched nervously. “I mean, not yet.” His ears flattened against his head at the incredulous shock that replaced the momentary hurt in her expression.

A look of sudden understanding stretched over the man's features. “Oh, you're still trying? Good luck with that! It took my wife and me two years to conceive this little guy.” He turned to go but stopped to nod at Kagome. “Thank you again, Miss.”

She smiled self-consciously and dared a glance at InuYasha. He was staring at the floor with an inscrutable look on his face. In an effort to cheer him up, she tweaked his ear. “I guess we're finished, aren't we?”

He looked visibly relieved. She had a feeling that he would have taken off at a sprint if he could have. “Can we *go* now?” he asked pointedly.

Her grin turned mischievous as she cast him a sidelong glance. “Too much baby shopping, InuYasha? I bet your kids would be adorable, especially if they had your ears.”

She missed the stunned, sad expression that crossed his features with her prediction. With a little giggle, Kagome took his hand and dragged him away from the store window.

InuYasha stared down at Kagome's hand in his and frowned. A family? Did he want one? He glanced over at Kagome. She was smiling dreamily. She giggled as two kids ran out in front of them, causing them to stop suddenly. One of the kids ran into Kagome's legs, and she steadied the girl and knelt down to talk to the child. “Be careful.”

“Sorry, Miss.”

Kagome's smile widened. “It's okay.” She straightened up as the children dashed off again. InuYasha didn't miss the wistful look on her face as the kids disappeared into the toy store nearby. His mouth went dry. She really *did* want a family . . .

He thought back to his own lonely childhood, of being shunned by both humans as well as by youkai . . . by his own brother . . . InuYasha's frown darkened. After his mother's death, he'd been forced to live on the run, always on the outside, never quite belonging. The thought of passing that sort of existence on to any children scared him. Even with Kagome, did he want a family, too?

They stepped outside the shopping center. Kagome had to shield her eyes from the light of the setting sun. It shined right in her face. InuYasha pushed his bleak thoughts aside.

A familiar scent came to him, and InuYasha stopped in his tracks, a low growl issuing challenge before he could stop himself. Beside him, Kagome turned a questioning glance but saw the one who had likely drawn that reaction from InuYasha.

Houjou stood nearby, hands in his pockets. He glowered at InuYasha without blinking before he deliberately stalked toward them. He stopped before them, giving Kagome a quick once-over before dismissing InuYasha completely. "You're looking well, Kagome. How've you been?"

"Fine, thanks," she said in an overly bright tone. InuYasha's ears flickered at the falsetto. "Getting ready to go to the university?"

"Yeah. I had to pick up a few things. Eri and Yuka said you decided not to go? Why would you do that?" His tone implied that InuYasha was the reason behind Kagome's decision. The look he shot InuYasha confirmed it.

Kagome shifted, crossing her arms over her chest. It took everything in InuYasha not to shove her behind his back and shred the human to ribbons. "I'm going to take some courses," she remarked. She could feel the tension between them, and it was making her nervous.

"You're way too smart to waste your life with that barbarian," Houjou commented.

"You scrawny little—" InuYasha cut in with a low growl.

Kagome grabbed InuYasha's arm. "InuYasha, no," she hissed in his ear.

For her sake, he cut off his growl and, grabbing Kagome's arm, he started to walk away. Houjou's hand to his back stopped him. "Let her go," Houjou said simply, gesturing at the arm that InuYasha still held.

InuYasha didn't move his head as he pinned the younger man with a stare. "Back off, Houjou. She isn't your concern."

"Of course she is. Kagome's *my* woman. She'll realize that soon enough."

Kagome opened her mouth to refute that claim. InuYasha growled fiercely, cutting her off and making Houjou retreat a step. But he recovered quickly enough and tried to look past InuYasha at her.

“InuYasha!” she complained as he shoved her behind his back. She caught herself on his shirt before she stumbled.

“Stay back, Kagome. Don’t interfere.” InuYasha stepped forward slowly but stopped before he reached Houjou.

A curious crowd had started to gather around them. InuYasha ignored the fact that he was making a spectacle of himself and stood his ground. Houjou refused to back down, too. “You think you’re man enough to keep me away from *my* Kagome?” Houjou scoffed.

“Stay away from her. I won’t warn you again,” InuYasha said quietly.

“Everyone’s been talking, *Mr. Izayoi*. Don’t worry, Kagome. Everyone knows that this guy’s brainwashed you,” he sneered before turning a wicked glower on InuYasha. “Did you just wait for her to graduate before you got her into bed or did you *force* yourself on her?”

Kagome’s shocked gasp echoed in his ears. Houjou couldn’t have hurt her worse if he had physically struck her. Reacting to the upset radiating off of her, InuYasha didn’t wait to hear more. In a blur of movement he had the human pinned against the building with his forearm against Houjou’s throat. InuYasha drew his claws back to strike. Kagome grabbed his wrist. “Don’t hurt him, InuYasha!” she implored. “*Please!*”

“He *hurt* you,” InuYasha snarled, not taking his eyes off Houjou. “I promise you he won’t do it again.”

“You’re going to hit me? In front of all of these witnesses?” Houjou goaded.

InuYasha shook off Kagome’s hands. “Just watch me.”

“InuYasha!”

“No, damn it!”

“*Fine!*”

Houjou choked out a laugh, which was the best he could do since InuYasha still had him pinned by the throat. “Go ahead. It’ll be that much easier for me to claim *my* woman back if you’re in jail for battery.”

Heaving a frustrated sigh, InuYasha balled up his fist and slammed it into the wall beside Houjou’s head, leaving behind a crater in the building where he had struck.



## ~~Chapter 25~~

### ~Avalanche~

‘Of all the stupid, ridiculous reasons to beat the crap out of someone,’ Kagome fumed as she stepped onto the bus. The entire incident bothered her much more than she wanted to admit.

She flopped down in an empty seat and sighed as her temple fell against the cold glass. Her head hurt, and for some reason, she couldn’t get the last image out of her mind, the one she’d seen in the baby store.

*The small, fuzzy kitsune pup darted toward her from the path behind. He leaped into her arms, chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath, “Kagome! I found a shard of the Sacred Jewel!”*

*Kagome stared over his shoulder at the little girl, standing nervously on the dirt path. “She has it?”*

With a quick shake of the head, Kagome rubbed her temples. ‘I really am going crazy,’ she decided with an incredulous laugh.

Why did Houjou have to show up? InuYasha would tear him apart, and it was all her fault. As the streets of Tokyo crept past the window, Kagome frowned. InuYasha had frightened her. The look on his face when he’d pinned Houjou against the building had been one that she wasn’t sure she ever wanted to see again. Why had his eyes flashed red, just for that second?

As she stared out the window, the city she knew so well faded and dimmed. The sounds on the bus that surrounded her diminished, and suddenly she felt as though she was in another place in time, in a world that was strangely familiar, with people she was as close to as her own family. The bus was gone, and she stared incredulously at the scene she had somehow become a part of.

*InuYasha, gripping the sword that now hung over the fireplace in his house, said, “It’s over . . . Despite someone getting in my way.”*

*A man with long black hair caught up in a ponytail—Kouga—thumped InuYasha on the head, drawing a glower from the hanyou. Kouga said, “You fiend! Were you actually going to kill me, too?!” InuYasha straightened up, sheathed the Tetsusaiga.*

‘How do I know that sword has a name?’ Kagome thought with a scowl.

*Kouga raised his fist, threatening InuYasha. “That’s good enough answer for me!”*

*InuYasha, still glaring sideways, said in a deceptively calm voice, “There you go.”*

*“I’m gonna waste you!”*

*Kagome ran over, planting herself between the two rivals. “What am I doing? How do I know that InuYasha really does want to flatten this wolf youkai?” She stood her ground, pushing InuYasha back a step and shooting him a reproachful glance. “Knock it off, you guys!”*

*“Nothing’s sacred to you when you’re swinging that thing around, is it, dog-boy?”*

*Kagome tried to forestall the escalating argument in the only way she could think of. Words popped into her mind and it seemed more like she couldn’t stop herself from saying them, even though she knew—just knew—that she would upset InuYasha with them. Mostly to placate the wolf youkai, she said, “He knows how fast you are, so he was sure you would get out of the way in time, right InuYasha?”*

*InuYasha, eyes closed, hands still on Tetsusaiga’s hilt, snorted loudly and remarked, “Why should I explain myself to that mangy wolf?” He glared back over his shoulder at Kouga for the last part of his warning. “Listen, if you ever get in my way again, next time I really will kill you.”*

*Kouga bristled and leaned forward, trying to get past Kagome. She refused to move. “I’d like to see you try it, you lame excuse for a half-dog!”*

*Kagome could feel the anger radiating off InuYasha. To her surprise, his tone was quiet, deliberate, and yet no less provoking. “Pardon?”*

*Kagome closed her eyes. Neither one of them could leave it go, could they? “InuYasha . . . Osuwari!”*

*InuYasha gasped and growled as he crashed to the ground at her command.*

With an unpleasant jolt, Kagome snapped out of her vision. She shot to her feet and pushed her way to the front of the bus. The air in the vehicle was smothering her, and she felt as though she was about to be physically ill. When the bus groaned to a stop, she darted out the door and stopped only to lean against the nearest building, dragging in lungfuls of air as she tried to brush off the nausea that came at her in waves.

What had she done to him; to InuYasha? Had she really held such power over him, to make him submit to her with just a word? The memory of the same thing happening when she’d tried to call off Dammit hit her hard, and when Kagome swallowed, she could taste the bile on her tongue.

*“Are you okay?”*

Kagome opened her eyes and turned her head to stare at the man who had addressed her. *'He isn't remarkable at all,'* she thought, *'so why does he give me the creeps?'* Then she gasped and scooted away. His jet black hair suddenly grew until it reached his waist. As it did, strange streaks appeared on his face, much like the markings on Sesshoumaru and Toga. But where their markings tended to lend an air of nobility, this man's marks were somehow more sinister, bloody red, jagged and violent. Fangs descended from his upper jaw, and Kagome involuntarily flinched when he smiled at her.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice surprisingly calm.

Ignoring her question, he grabbed her arms and squeezed. "A pretty little thing like you shouldn't be wandering around the city alone. Just think of what could happen if someone . . . *unsavory* . . . got a hold on you? Let me see you home. Where do you live?"

She tried to pull her arm away from the stranger. His grip tightened, claws digging into the soft flesh of her wrist but not quite enough to draw blood . . . yet. He pulled her down the street, completely ignoring her struggling otherwise. "Let go," she demanded, her voice rising in pitch.

He stopped suddenly and sniffed her, making a face and glowering down at her. "You stink," the youkai said as his grip tightened on her wrist. "You reek of *them*."

Kagome opened her mouth to scream for help. People in passing were already eyeing her oddly. If she could get someone to help her, she'd be safe. The youkai's fingers tightened even more, obviously knowing what she was planning. "Scream and you die, right here, right now," he hissed loudly enough for her to hear him. His razor sharp claws dug into her wrist. She choked back a pained groan and glanced quickly over her shoulder as he dragged her forward again.

*'InuYasha, where are you?'*

She'd been stupid, to have gotten on that bus. He swore he would protect her, and she had voluntarily left him behind.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, struggling for a calm that she was far from feeling.

The youkai turned abruptly and headed down an alley. His chuckle was harsh, like autumn leaves skittering across the barren ground. "I'm going to lure out your dog protector."

"Who are you?"

"You don't need to know that."

"What kind of youkai are you, then?" she challenged.

He seemed momentarily surprised. Then he smiled coldly. "You know? How? Humans can't see us. You're a weak, pathetic lot. Or perhaps it is because of the one who has covered you in his stench? He's youkai, isn't he?"

Kagome didn't correct the youkai on InuYasha's actual status, but her chin rose stubbornly, and her eyes glowed bright. Was it the thought of InuYasha that gave her the bravado to cast her fear aside? Or was it something deeper, some innate knowledge that she had a power that she just needed to remember? "I see you for what you are. Now let go of me, or I'll—"

Condescending laughter cut her off. "And what am I, aside from being a far superior form than you, human girl." He wrenched her wrist back and twisted. Kagome yelped in pain before she could stave back the sound. She felt her own blood, hot and sticky, trail down her arm and fall in agonizing drips. The youkai lowered her arm and stared down in satisfaction at the few droplets of blood on the pavement. "That will bring him," he remarked out loud but to himself. "Let him come to retrieve his bitch."

Kagome shook her head, willed away the burning sting of the paltry wounds. "Why do you hate him? How do you know him?"

He shrugged, almost as though it was a second thought. "Oh, it's not him I despise. It's his kind. Those damn dogs . . . they stole the power from us, from my people." He sank back on a trash can and finally let go of Kagome's arm. Her first instinct was to run, but she had very little doubt in her mind that this youkai would catch her and kill her without much effort if she tried to flee. She forced herself to remain calm and slumped against the opposite wall. Holding her injured wrist, she wished once more that InuYasha would come.

*A cage, of sorts, and a giant mummified panther demon . . . Sesshoumaru and InuYasha battling youkai as the panthers performed the rituals to bring the dead one back to life . . . Sesshoumaru's Tenseiga . . .*

Kagome gasped softly, her eyes lighting with recognition. Without wondering how she knew, she narrowed her gaze at the youkai. "You're from the panther tribe," she remarked, "and InuYasha and Sesshoumaru defeated your ancestors."

The youkai's eyes glowed bright red, an intense hatred burning into her brain. "Shut the hell up," he cautioned. "Or you'll not live to see me kill your dog. He will die." He stared at her a moment then smiled nastily. "Then again, so will you."

Kagome blinked in surprise. Something in those words was all too familiar to her. The threat . . . the tone . . . or was it just the open animosity in his very being?

*"Watch, miko. Watch as I kill your beloved InuYasha!"*

*Naraku . . .*

But this youkai was too pathetic, too weak, too pitiful to be Naraku.

Kagome lifted a hand to her forehead. Naraku was their enemy, hers and InuYasha's . . . and she, along with another woman, had destroyed him. Who was the other woman? Kagome could see

the two arrows bathed in pinkish light, as they hurtled toward Naraku, as they ripped him into pulsing bits. Who was she? And why did the memory of that particular woman cause such a stabbing pain in Kagome's heart?

She balled her hands into fists, digging her nails into the palms of her hands, fighting against the consuming pain that the image of that woman brought on. In her mind, InuYasha's voice whispered, "*Ki . . . Kikyou . . .*"

"*Kagome!*"

"InuYasha . . . *InuYasha!*" she screamed, her head snapping to the side. The light of the setting sun cast him in a mysterious light, and his crimson sweatshirt brought to mind another place, another time when he came to save her. Every part of her wanted to run to him as he flew down the narrow alley toward her. The panther youkai was way too close. She didn't move. Just seeing InuYasha, though, was enough to convince her that everything would be fine.

InuYasha lunged before her, his stance ready, daring the panther to come after him. "Stay behind me, Kagome."

She held onto the back of his sweatshirt. The blood on her hands disappeared in the crimson material. She let go of him and sank back against the wall again, feeling weak, drained, ready to pass out.

The panther youkai laughed. "Touching, certainly. Prepare to die, oh great Prince of the Dogs."

"Keh! You think a weak youkai like you can defeat me?" InuYasha scoffed. "Wait here, Kagome. I'll finish him off."

Kagome's gasp was lost in the melee as InuYasha launched himself at the panther demon. "*Wait here, Kagome. I'll finish him off.*"

"*No, InuYasha . . . I'm coming with you.*"

"*No . . . If you're in danger, I can't concentrate. I have to know you're safe.*"

"*No!*"

"*No!*" Kagome wailed, sinking to her knees. Her cry went unheeded.

InuYasha drew his claws back to cut the panther in half. The youkai jumped out of the way just as InuYasha yelled, "*Sankon-tetsusou!*"

*InuYasha dove at Naraku. "Sankon-tetsusou!" The tendrils that he'd shot out to capture InuYasha and Sesshoumaru fell to the ground in a writhing heap before they melded back together and kept on coming.*

The panther youkai laughed as InuYasha missed. He lashed out with his razor sharp claws, catching the material of the sweatshirt. Kagome heard the sickening rip as well as InuYasha's gasp of pain. "Did I scratch the pup?"

Kagome watched in fascinated horror as InuYasha rubbed his hand in his own blood. He flung out his hand as red blades seemed to shoot off his fingertips. "*Hijin-ketsusou!*"

"Hijin-ketsusou!" *The cocoon that held her wouldn't give, not even for that. InuYasha tore at the threads that held her and the others, babbling, incoherent, intent only on breaking the sleeping spell that held her so tightly. The Forest of Grief . . .*

"InuYasha," she whispered. He didn't hear her. The blades that were meant to tear the youkai to shreds sailed past him as he dodged. InuYasha growled.

"You're just a hanyou! The Great Prince Dog is nothing more than a worthless half-breed!" the panther demon scoffed.

"I'll show you," InuYasha said, standing slowly from the crouch he'd landed in. "I'm in a class of my own!"

"*I'm in a class of my own!*" *InuYasha growled as he launched himself at Goshinki, tearing the demon apart with his claws.*

*InuYasha, yelling at Sango as Kagura flew away on her feather, as Kohaku stared down at his sister from above, "That's why you can't kill him!"*

*The miasma, and the vision that had ripped Kagome wide open. The thought of InuYasha kissing Kikyou . . .*

Memory upon memory tumbled over Kagome. She heard InuYasha attack the youkai. She heard the youkai fall. Closing her eyes against what she didn't want to see, Kagome whined softly to herself as more memories came.

*InuYasha, standing on his father's skeleton, staring at her as though she'd gone crazy, "I want you to shut up and let me protect you!"*

*The Tetsusaiga . . . the un-mother . . . Yura of the demon-hair . . . the well-house . . . and finally . . .*

With a startling snap like icy cold water, Kagome jerked back as the flashlight's beam shined right in her face. InuYasha stood nearby talking in low tones to a couple of police officers. As though he felt her gaze on him, he turned slowly, stretching out the fingers of his right hand. Had he injured them?

He flexed his fingers, his knuckles popping loudly as a couple of police officers dragged a barely conscious youkai toward the street. The popping sound, however, sparked one final memory . . .



## ~~Chapter 26~~

### ~Fallout~

Soft voices came to Kagome, shuffled through her clouded mind as though she wasn't really there at all. Try as she might to stay blissfully unaware, she could feel the tug of consciousness pulling her back to reality and out of the comforting arms of oblivion. With a soft moan, Kagome slowly opened her eyes.

"Oh, Kagome!" Mrs. Higurashi breathed out as she kissed Kagome's forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"I've felt better," she remarked ruefully as she gingerly put her hand to her aching head.

Kagome struggled to sit up. Her wrist throbbed where the panther youkai had dug in his nails. She shivered as she deliberately shoved those memories out of her mind. A sound near her closet made her glance over. InuYasha stood, a guarded, confused expression on his face. The flood of memories came back with a vengeance, and Kagome didn't think, she just reacted.

With a muffled yelp and wild, fearful eyes, Kagome pushed herself back against the headboard as though she wanted to crawl through it. The desire to escape his probing stare was a palpable thing, and she threw herself into her mother's arms. Hot tears fell from her eyes as she tried to stave them back. Mrs. Higurashi held onto her, rocking her like she was a child, and, as she glanced at InuYasha, she jerked her head toward the door.

Kagome's eyes were squeezed shut as she fought back frightened tears. She missed the raw pain on InuYasha's face. His shoulders slumped, his ears flattened, and his hands balled into fists and jammed deep in his pockets, he left.

"I'll get you something cold to drink," Mrs. Higurashi said as she headed out of the room after giving Kagome's hand a gentle squeeze. "And a bath. Yes, that should help."

Souta sank down on the side of the bed and idly traced the pattern of the machine stitching. He wouldn't look at her. "You're okay, right?" he finally asked.

"I'll be fine," she assured her brother. She reached out to touch his arm. He jerked back and shot Kagome an angry look. "Souta?"

"Why did you scream at him, Kagome? Why did you cry?"

She frowned in confusion even as she sank back, burned by her brother's angry tirade. "Who are you talking about?"

"Who else? InuYasha!"

The sudden flash of his claws raced through her mind again, and Kagome recoiled. "I'm tired, Souta," she asked weakly. The claws descended in her memory again. She flinched.

Souta snorted. "You're going to make him leave, aren't you?" He got up. "Sometimes you're so selfish!"

She watched her brother go and drew a ragged breath. Something wasn't right, and she knew it. It seemed as though she had a lifetime of memories thrown at her all at once. She really had no idea how to make sense of them. They didn't have a particular rhyme or reason, just existed to her like disparate images with only herself as a common link.

And yet . . . and yet, in those same memories, InuYasha was always there.

Kagome crawled out of bed and stumbled toward the bathroom. The warmth of the water permeated the air inside with a moist heat. It soothed her nerves, and she sighed softly as she stripped off her clothes and dropped them in the hamper before sinking into the tub with a small moan of satisfaction.

As though snatching at the remnants of a dream, Kagome fought for elusive understanding that lay beyond her reach; the knowledge of what had happened in her past teased her unmercifully, her altered memories taunting her with their deliberate disarray. When she'd gotten her memories back, they'd been so jumbled and so rapid that she'd not had any sort of chance to make any sense out of them at all, if there was any to be had. Letting her head fall back against the cold tile wall, Kagome's eyes closed as she let the memories come again.

This time, all she saw were all flashes of InuYasha. A million times he'd turn to stare at her with a different expression, with countless different emotions. He'd yelled at her, fussed at her, argued with her. Did it matter how many times he grumbled or muttered about something she had ask him? Yet in every vision, one thing was always constant: he always wore a red outfit.

*'The fire rat clothes,'* she realized slowly. *'The one he gave me.'* It was the significance of the expressions on his face, the light behind his eyes. The words he'd never spoken, the idle moments when he thought no one was looking. How many times had he stood there in the distance, staring off into space and idly touching that necklace?

Kagome's eyes flew open, and she gasped, sitting up straight as she felt the color drain out of her face. That necklace . . .

*She pulled the beads out of his hand and clutched them to her chest. "They hurt you, didn't they? The beads . . . you used to have . . . they hurt you."*

The look on his face had been melancholy, as though, no matter how much pain there may have been, it didn't even begin to compare with whatever had been happening inside his head. She hadn't understood that, at the time . . .

*"And you've never had anyone to love? Where is she now?"*

*"She . . . she forgot about me, about us."*

*Kagome reached out and caught his tear with her index finger.*

*"Why did you do that?" he asked, his voice soft, full of confusion and wonder.*

*"Mama always said that if you catch the first tear, your wish will come true."*

*"What did you wish for?"*

*"I wished that she'd remember you."*

*"Kagome . . ."*

*She dragged off the necklace and shoved it into his hand. "You wanted these before, right? Because they remind you of . . . her . . . don't they?"*

That expression . . . She couldn't get that expression on his face out of her mind. The woman he loved, the one who had forgotten him . . .

*"Why do you get that look on our face? Why do you look so lonely? It's that girl, isn't it? The one who forgot you? It's all right. You don't have to say. I see it in your eyes sometimes; when you think I'm not looking . . . If she came back . . . if she remembered . . . I know you've said you'd stay with me, but if she came back, if she made you happy . . . I'd want you to be with her."*

Her mind slowed to a crawl as two things became shockingly apparent to her. Firstly, no matter what that particular memory meant, the InuYasha she knew wouldn't hurt her, ever. Would she have gone anywhere with him if he really had tried to hurt her? Secondly . . .

A slow smile rose to her lips and spread, lending a bright sparkle to the depths of her brown eyes as tears suddenly welled up. "He loves . . . me."

-----

InuYasha dug his claws into the roof as he struggled to stave back the desire to stomp into Kagome's room and somehow make her understand. He sighed as he hung his head. As if he could do that to her. Wasn't that the reason he hadn't told her everything before?

Why did she fear him? She'd never been afraid of him before. If she had recovered her memory, how could she even think it for a second? Surely she would have known from those images alone that he'd never hurt her? Didn't she know from their time together since she'd forgotten that he never would?

"Damn," he muttered, resisting the desire to slam his fist through the roof. He'd gotten what he'd wished for, so many times. She remembered. He never thought that he'd ever see that sort of fear in her though, and that he, apparently, had been the cause of it . . .

He let out a pitiful growl. As though he couldn't stop himself the sound came of its own accord from somewhere deep inside him. It was a sound of lamenting. In all the times he had imagined Kagome remembering, he'd always hoped that she would turn to him with that smile so full of her heart, the one that lit her entire being from the inside. He had never thought that it would be like this.

A low whine greeted his ears, and InuYasha hopped down from the roof, lighting on the ground beside Dammit. "What are you doing here?" he asked the dog though his tone held little real reproach.

Dammit stared up at him with sad eyes. Her head was bowed in deference, and her tail wagged once. Gingerly, she lapped the back of his hand, telling him that he was not alone.

InuYasha wandered slowly over to the base of Goshinboku and sank down, leaning against the sturdy tree. Dammit curled up beside him, her head in his lap. She whined a few times, obviously picking up on his own feelings of sadness. *'Her-r-r hur-r-rt Lor-rd Dog,'* Dammit remarked.

InuYasha sighed and patted the dog's head. *'It wasn't Kagome's fault. She can't help what she remembers.'* Was he trying to convince the dog or himself?

Dammit growled fiercely but didn't lift her head. InuYasha knew the sound. He tapped her nose in rebuke. "No, Dammit, I've told you before. Kagome's special to me. You can't harm her."

She stared at him almost belligerently. Finally, though, she heaved a sigh and let her head flop back into his lap. *'Her not hur-rt Lord Dog anymor-re.'*

He let his head fall back against the tree as the image of Kagome's terrified face flashed through his mind again. He grimaced. Even the few times he'd lost control and had transformed into a youkai, she hadn't been afraid of him. When Miroku, Sango, and Shippou had been fearful for their lives, Kagome had come to him, had forced him to remember himself. In so many ways he owed her his life. She'd saved him in every single way that someone like him could be saved.

And now she feared him.

He could feel the tears poking at his eyes and tingling his nose. They wouldn't come. As though someone as pitiful as he was didn't even deserve the comfort of the emotional release, his eyes were hot, dry, gritty. He'd never felt so alone.

*'I should get out of here before Kagome sees me from her window and freaks out again,'* he thought with an inward flinch. The last thing he wanted was to cause her more pain.

InuYasha stood and started to head toward the gate that led into his forest. Dammit walked next to him, her pace matching his.

A sudden gust of air, the whisper of Goshinboku . . . InuYasha stopped and turned back. As if the tree was speaking, he frowned as he stepped closer.

The first time he saw her, he was still pinned to this very tree, InuYasha thought with a sad smile. Kikyō had sealed him. Kagome . . . Kagome had set him free. Everything revolved around her. She was everything he knew, everything he dared to hope for. He'd defied time to be with her. But would she even want him? And could he stand to see that awful fear in her gaze?

*'What do I do?'* he asked Goshinboku. Perhaps it was wishful thinking, asking the tree for help. InuYasha didn't care. He had no answers left.

*'Faith,'* the tree whispered, leaves shifting in the gentlest breeze. *'She comes with light.'*

"She comes with light," he repeated softly, unable to grasp the meaning behind the words that had been whispered in his mind. Kagome was his light. What did it mean?

The soft hand on his shoulder gave him pause. The direction of the blowing breeze had allowed her to sneak up on him. The hand was supple, tender, a hand he knew. Spinning around to face her, Kagome didn't smile. She stared at the ground. He could smell her misery, could taste the salt of her tears without having to see them. Then he realized something else.

She wore the fire rat robe.

"InuYasha . . . I'm so—"

Before she could finish her sentence, he dragged her into his arms, relief washing over him in waves. The sudden action stilled her words. He held her close, eyes closed against the magnitude of emotions that crashed over him. She started to apologize again. His arms tightened around her, just enough to silence her. She held onto him, as though she was afraid to let go, and he held her with a the fierceness that he fought to control but could not.

"You remembered," he finally said, breaking the fragile silence.

She nodded against his shoulder then shook her head. "I did, but . . . None of it makes any sense to me. It's all confused . . ."

"Give it time," he said, feeling stupid for not being able to help her more.



## ~Chapter 27~

### ~Crash and Burn~

InuYasha hissed in pain as the salt water of the ocean bit into the raw flesh wounds on his stomach. The sting subsided quickly enough, and he sank down in the water, letting his head fall back against the rocks behind him. He was so tired. *'Bone weary would be a good way to describe it,'* he thought with a grimace. It had been too long since he'd had a decent fight on this side of the well.

Kagome had fallen asleep. He hadn't had the heart to wake her when they'd arrived. He put her on the bed in the master suite and had decided he ought to clean himself up. Still covered in his own blood as well as that of the panther demon, InuYasha hadn't taken the time to clean or dress his wounds. He'd been too worried about Kagome to even try. When she had asked him to take her away, he went straight to Sesshoumaru to ask to borrow this beach house. Then he'd gone straight back to get Kagome.

Why had he felt such urgency, such a strong desire to get her away from the shrine? Why had he nearly crumbled at the look of aching pleading, of unrequited yearning in the depths of her eyes? *'Because,'* he thought with a vague smile, *"because she's stronger than I anyone I've ever known . . . because she is Kagome."* He sighed again. After spending so long protecting her from whatever would harm her, he couldn't protect her from the torrent of memories that made no sense to her.

InuYasha made a face as he glanced down at the torn skin. *'Keh! Good thing my body's not weak like a human's,'* he thought to himself. *'These wounds will be gone by morning.'* He got up slowly and waded toward the shore, making quick work of drying off and dressing before he sank back down on the rocks beside the water's edge.

His ears drooped slightly. Was he to blame for her discomfiting thoughts? With an inward sigh, he winced as he twisted to stretch his back and shook out his hair, letting the warm, salty air ripple through the damp strands to dry it. Glancing toward the house, he briefly wondered how long it would be before Kagome woke up. After spending the last five hours in the car with Sesshoumaru's chauffer, InuYasha was stiff and sore from inactivity. When Kagome had fallen into an exhausted sleep, he had held her close, smoothing away the lines of distress that had crossed her features.

What he really wanted was a good, long run, but he couldn't leave Kagome here alone, either. She'd surely worry if she woke up to find him gone. He really didn't like to be far from her, anyway. As if in answer to his musings, he saw her vague outline in the bedroom window. She disappeared, and he grinned.

She was watching him? How long? What had she seen? No time like the present to find out, he decided as he stood and stretched. Maybe, with a little gentle prodding, he could get her to go for a morning run with him . . .

InuYasha stopped in the kitchen long enough to grab a box of pastries the driver had brought back earlier. Having not thought to bring any sort of provisions, InuYasha had paid the man to drive into the nearest town and bring out food before he'd headed back to Tokyo.

Kagome was sitting up on the bed, her arms wrapped around her covered legs, her chin resting on her raised knees. He sank down beside her and held out the box. "Hungry?" She shook her head but wouldn't look him in the eye. Her skin was tinged with rosy color, and InuYasha had to school his expression lest she should glance at him. "You look better."

"Sesshoumaru called," she blurted quickly. "He said that he forgot to tell you that the water was shut off and that the company is closed until Monday."

InuYasha slowly smiled. "I thought as much," he remarked, setting the box down and reaching in for a pastry. "You need to eat something."

He could feel Kagome's eyes shift to peek at him even though she didn't move her head. "How's your stomach?"

"Keh! That was nothing." He set his pastry aside and gently took her hand. He glanced up at her before he unwrapped the bandage around her wrist to survey her wounds. The flesh was bruised and tender-looking around the puncture wounds. But they were clean and looked to be on the way to healing. He turned her hand in his and brushed his fingertips over the wounds. "I'm sorry, Kagome. I swore I'd protect you, and I didn't."

"It was my own fault," she argued but didn't try to draw her arm away, "and I'm fine."

Her pulse fluttered wildly under his fingertips, speeding up in an erratic pattern that seemed to be more like an awkward dance than the flow of blood inside her. InuYasha raised her wrist to his lips and was rewarded with the quickening under his touch. "Did you bring your first aid kit?"

Kagome nodded and pointed toward a chair near the door. Her backpack sat there where InuYasha had set it before heading outside for his bath. "You stay here," he remarked as she started to get up. He retrieved the bag and sat back down on the edge of the bed. She took the half of his pastry that he'd left sitting as he dug around for the white box. He pulled out a leather bound book and frowned. There weren't any markings on the cover, and the pages had gold gilt edges. "What's this?"

Kagome took the book and flipped open the cover as InuYasha resumed his search. He tugged out the small white box—her first aid kit—and dropped the bag onto the floor beside the bed.

With a confused frown, she stared at the first page thoughtfully. “It’s my mother’s,” she said, holding out the bite of pastry toward InuYasha. He leaned over and let her feed it to him. She licked a bit of icing off her fingers before shooting him a quick glance. “It says that here that she kept this journal for me, but she can’t have done that. The dates are from before I was born.”

InuYasha swallowed and held out his hand. “Can I see it?”

Kagome let him take the book. As she dug into the first aid kit for antiseptic and bandages, he flipped through the pages. He stopped to skim a few paragraphs here and there as slow understanding dawned on him. *She told me this story. She asked me to remember it. It was the story of a hanyou named InuYasha, a priestess named Kikyou . . . and my daughter . . .*

“She really *did* know,” he mumbled then shook his head.

“She knew what? Who’s she?”

InuYasha snapped the journal closed and dropped it on the bed. Taking the roll of gauze out of her hands, he didn’t answer as he started carefully wrapping her wrist again. “Make sure you keep this clean, Kagome,” he ordered gruffly, sternly.

With her uninjured hand, she reached over to stop him. “InuYasha, you can’t always protect me, and I know you want to, but really, you can’t. Tell me what you know?”

He stared at her for a long moment then sighed. “Your mom and I had a talk before,” he admitted as he surveyed his bandaging job. “She said she remembered everything.”

Kagome didn’t answer right away. InuYasha put the first aid kit back into her bag and retrieved another pastry before commenting on her silence. “Why so quiet?”

Her tone was clipped, angry, almost petulant, and the look she shot him could have stopped any youkai dead in their tracks. “Why didn’t anyone tell me all of this sooner? I’d expect this sort of thing from my mom or even from Sesshoumaru . . . but *you*?” Her eyes suddenly widened, and she gasped, hands flying up to cover her lips. “InuYasha? What happened . . . where’s Shippou?”

InuYasha dropped the food back in the box, giving up on his attempt to eat for the moment. “Shippou’s fine. You’ve seen him almost every day, in fact. You just never realized it.”

An odd look passed over her face, and InuYasha smiled slightly. “Mr. Kissune. It’s him?”

InuYasha nodded slowly. “Yeah.”

Kagome sighed and flopped back against the headboard. “I never knew . . . Why?”

Her tone was devoid of anger, empty of everything, as though she had overtaxed her emotions enough in the last couple days. InuYasha flinched. “I couldn’t. Everyone was afraid what it

would do to you, and . . . I couldn't hurt you." He couldn't meet her eyes as he shook his head slowly. "After seeing you like that . . . Kagome? Why? Why were you afraid? Of . . . me?"

Slowly, hesitantly, as though she expected him to push her away, he felt her body press against his back as her hands clutched his shoulders. When she sighed, her breath stirred the hair by his neck. The sensation was heady, sending shivers down his spine at the unintended caress. "I remembered you, and you were trying to . . ." She trailed off. InuYasha squeezed his eyes closed against her unspoken words. Kagome cleared her throat and said, in a much stronger voice, "You wanted the Shikon no Tama . . . but I realized . . . no matter what that memory was, it wasn't the truth, and it was only the once. You've never tried to hurt me again, have you?"

He reached up and covered her hands with his own. The warmth in his touch meshed with the cool skin under his fingers until they were one, the same. "You were never scared of me before, even then. I wouldn't . . . Don't you know that?"

"I do, now. That story you told me . . . I always wondered why I could see it in my head, why it seemed like you and I were the ones searching for the shards. The way you described it all . . . I could *see* it." She rested her cheek against his shoulder. "I don't know if there is any sort of order to the memories I've recovered. I just know that I am supposed to be here, with you."

InuYasha smiled. Why was it that, even when he was trying to comfort Kagome, it normally ended up with her doing that for him? He turned enough to pull her into his arms, cradling her against his chest as she sighed softly, as though there was no place she'd rather be. "I'll help you, if I can," he assured her, her warm scent washing over him, making him dizzy, overwhelming his senses. *'If I can't, then at least I'll be beside her.'*

"That's enough, maybe," she replied, her voice vague. She idly twisted his hair around her finger. The gentle tug sent another shiver straight down his spine. "Even if it never makes sense to me, at least I remember you."

His answer was a gentle tightening of his arms around her. Kagome snuggled closer. Did she realize that? Or had it been more of an involuntary reaction on her part? Either way, InuYasha couldn't help the overwhelming sense of peace that flowed over him, the complete awe that Kagome could inspire in him.

She reached up to wrap her arm around his neck but stopped when she brushed against his prayer bead necklace. Her hand fell away, and she gasped softly. "Why did you put those back on?" she asked.

InuYasha shrugged. "I was used to them."

Her response was a muffled snort that sounded suspiciously like one of his own. "*Used* to them?" she echoed, amazement in her tone. "You hated those. You always complained about them."

"I complained about a lot of things that I thought would always be there."

He grimaced. He hadn't meant it to sound like that. Kagome stiffened in his arms. "I see."

"I didn't mean it like that," he offered, feeling completely lame; as though he should have been able to say what he meant in a better way.

Kagome sat up and turned to look at him, a calculating expression on her face, as though she was considering something that she worried that he wouldn't like. His gaze narrowed. Why was she looking at him like that? "Kagome?"

Her eyes cleared, and she frowned as she let her gaze drop to his chest. Why did he feel such a terrible sense of trepidation? Kagome shook her head slowly, her fingers coming up to grasp the prayer bead necklace tight. She started to lift them over his head. His hands shot up to stop her, grabbing her wrists, staying her movement. "No."

She blinked in surprise at the complete finality in his tone but her hands didn't drop the necklace. "InuYasha—"

"No!"

Her chin dropped as her eyes erupted with the flames of challenge brought on by the vehemence in his tone. "You don't need these anymore! You *haven't* needed them for a long time."

His irritation turned into a glower of defiance, and he refused to let go of her wrists. "It isn't about *needing*, Kagome. Just leave them!"

She fought against his grip, still trying to bring the beads over his head. To gain leverage, she rose up on her knees and tugged harder. InuYasha stubbornly refused to let go. "InuYasha! Let me take them off of you!"

InuYasha shot off the bed. Kagome's grip slackened, and before she could try again, he stalked away from her and leaned against the wall, arms crossed mulishly over his chest. Kagome, to her credit, was standing, glaring at him as though she thought he was being contradictory for the sake of it. "Come on, InuYasha! You've never liked those, I know you haven't. Now why won't you let me have them?"

"Because if I take them off, you won't trust me!"

"Do you think that's why I trusted you before?"

"Wasn't it?"

Kagome leveled a glare at him designed to tell him exactly what she thought of his assessment. "Of course not! Now will you let me take them off you?"

He shook his head stubbornly. "They're mine!"



## ~~Chapter 28~~

### ~Seashell~

Kagome wandered along the shore. She stopped long enough to giggle as a small wave crashed over her feet. It felt good to be out here in the fresh air so far removed from her home. When had she stopped enjoying the bustle of Tokyo? When had she started to inwardly yearn for something quieter, more peaceful? She smiled. She had a feeling that it might have started the moment she had first seen a certain hanyou sleeping peacefully where he was pinned to Goshinboku.

Glancing back at the book that lay in the sand, her smile faded but didn't disappear. Her mother's journal had helped but hadn't answered all the questions that Kagome had. She'd been reading it for hours. She was finished now.

"Your mom told me she knew the story," InuYasha remarked hours ago as Kagome sank into the sand with the journal. Then he'd taken off after mumbling some excuse that she hadn't heard. She had a feeling that he had somehow known that she would need some time to digest whatever information the journal could give her.

Kagome shaded her eyes with her hand and surveyed the surrounding landscape for any sign of his silver hair or the red t-shirt he wore. She wasn't sure where he'd gone but she could sense him nearby. The knowledge brought a surge of warmth that wrapped around her, holding her securely. InuYasha always had watched over her. That he still desired to do so made her happy.

They hadn't discussed the disagreement. When she had tried to ask him about it, she'd gotten a glower for her efforts. Unwilling to reignite the argument, she'd remained silent instead.

She frowned. It didn't make sense to her, really, why he would want to keep the prayer beads. She had thought that it might have been because Kikyou had made them. After his vehement denial, though, it was clear to her that he had an entirely different reason for his otherwise stubborn insistence that he keep the necklace. She sighed. She didn't want that sort of power over him. She never really had.

*'For not wanting that power, you certainly used it against him enough,'* her conscience pricked.

Kagome sighed. She had to acknowledge, her inner voice had a point. InuYasha might have done his fair share to bring on her irritation. Still, she'd be the first to admit that she might well have abused that power a few times. Then, too, the necklace had come in useful once or twice. In the beginning, Kaede had put them on him, to stop him from trying to steal the Shikon no Tama.

*'Don't forget his fights with Kouga,'* she defended herself, *'or the times he'd transformed and I used it to bring him back to normal.'*

She made a self-disgusted face. She had to admit, she hadn't actually needed that incantation in a very, *very* long time. *'You ought to at least apologize to him.'* Kagome smiled wanly. Maybe she would, if he would let her . . .

Her eyes fell on the journal again, and she bit her lower lip as her hand fell onto the leather cover. At least her memories were a *little* clearer. With the overview provided in the journal, Kagome had been able to put some of her memories in perspective, even if she wasn't able to arrange them all in exact order. At least she knew roughly what happened and when, even if she hadn't been able to figure out how it was that she still possessed two years' worth of memories that seemed to overlap the ones she'd gotten back. As though she had somehow led two entirely separate lives, Kagome couldn't quite understand why it would seem this way.

*'I couldn't have been in the past and here at the same time,'* she reasoned as she sank back down next to the journal, *'but I was.'* She could remember being dragged into the well on her fifteenth birthday. Then again, she could remember the birthday dinner that her mother had painstakingly prepared for her that evening, as well.

The only part of her memory that she couldn't seem to reconcile was what had happened between the battle with Naraku and the morning she awoke in her bed; her seventeenth birthday. The jewel she'd given InuYasha was the Shikon no Tama. This she knew. But it was dull, dormant. How had she purified it? And why did she feel such hesitation in asking InuYasha if he knew? A foreboding rose inside her as she considered asking him, as if the purification had a lot to do with him, maybe more so than it had affected her. . .

With a start, Kagome gasped as InuYasha set a bucket by her feet and dropped down in the sand next to her. She'd been so lost in her musings that she hadn't heard him approach. She cast him a cautious glance before daring to look inside. She had a feeling what she'd find in there. She smelled fresh fish long before she saw them. Cleaned and ready to be cooked, she noted with a large dose of relief. Kagome smiled, remembering the number of times he'd returned to their campsite with whatever he'd caught. It was always cleaned, always ready to cook. Had he realized that cleaning the game would have turned her stomach? She shot him another glance. He had his face turned up toward the sun, eyes closed, a vaguely smug smile on his features. Yes, she supposed he had known . . .

It struck her as familiar, his desire to provide for them. Though he hadn't complained when she'd brought food back from her era, he'd always gone hunting as the rest of them set up camp for the night, whether they'd needed the food or not.

"I didn't see you fishing," she remarked, fluttering her hand toward the ocean.

InuYasha leaned back on his elbows. "There's a freshwater pond just through those trees," he said, jerking his head in the opposite direction of the beach. "I'll take you there after supper, if you want a bath."

“Thanks,” she said softly, suddenly embarrassed at the idea of bathing with him so close by. She’d done it thousands of times in the past. Why did it feel so different now?

“Here. I, uh, picked this up for you.”

Kagome blinked in surprise and hesitantly took the seashell he offered her. Delicate and beautiful, the shell was perfectly formed. She shot him a grin but as she recalled what she had been thinking about earlier, her smile faded. “InuYasha?”

He was laying flat with his arm draped over his eyes. Was he sleeping? “Hmm?”

“I’m sorry I used the beads against you all those times,” she said in a hushed tone, blushing despite the fact that he couldn’t see her face.

“It didn’t hurt,” he observed, brushing aside her apology.

Kagome sighed. “Still . . .”

“Don’t worry about it.”

She frowned and stared at the shell in her hand. He’d sounded sincere when he’d told her not to worry. For some reason, his dismissal of her apology made her feel just a little worse about it. “When we get home, I’ll put a hole in this,” she said, turning the shell over in her fingers. “So I can put it on a chain.”

He sat up and reached over, gently taking the shell from her. After looking it over carefully, InuYasha slowly, meticulously pushed into it with a claw. He stared at his handiwork a moment then handed it back. “Keh! A drill would break the flimsy thing,” he scoffed as he dropped back in the sand again.

She blinked as she stared at the unmarred perfection. Not even so much as a scratch. Claws that she knew could tear an enemy to bits, yet gentle enough to precisely place a tiny hole for a necklace. InuYasha was a paradox. His gruff, brash exterior had always hidden what he hated others to see, that heart of gold that so matched his eyes. She sighed and smiled, holding the shell tightly. “You’re hungry, aren’t you? I’ll get this fish started, then.”

She got up and grabbed the bucket’s handle. InuYasha sat up quickly and reached for the bucket, too. Their fingers brushed against each other. Kagome swallowed hard. She lifted the bucket and straightened up. The hem of her skirt caught briefly on something, and InuYasha groaned softly. Wondering why, she peeked over her shoulder to look at him. He was sprawled flat on his back, and his eyes locked with hers.

“InuYasha? Are you all right?” she asked, eyeing him closely as a heady expression entered his eyes. They darkened to nearly a topaz hue, and Kagome’s breath caught in a sudden gasp. Helpless to look away, she stopped in her tracks. He didn’t move.

A million things were said without a spoken word. As though a connection had been opened between her mind and his, Kagome understood what he wasn't able to say. The current between their eyes was like a golden strand of wire, shining, glistening, bright, beautiful—unbreakable.

In the end, InuYasha was the one to look away. Clearing his throat as though he didn't trust his voice to be steady, he spoke in a low, precise voice. "I'll start a fire if you want to cook those out here."

Kagome blinked as reality made a bitter intrusion. She nodded and hurried toward the deck. She set the bucket down and leaned back with a sigh. Fingertips gripping the counter so hard they turned white, she drew in a few ragged breaths, willing her thumping heart to steady. What was it about InuYasha's mere stare that could unsettle her so quickly?

Glancing out the window, Kagome grinned, cradling the seashell he'd given her against her chest. InuYasha was sitting up now, arms draped loosely around his raised knees. He was staring off into the distance, but even from where she stood, she could see the vague smile on his face, too.

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"You're not peeking, right?" Kagome called over her shoulder, her arms wrapped protectively over her chest as she shivered slightly in the cold pond. She couldn't see InuYasha anywhere. But that didn't mean he *wasn't* watching.

"No, Kagome, I'm not peeking," InuYasha's voice trailed back to her. She narrowed her eyes at his overly-tolerant tone. He had stopped on the other side of the large boulders on the shore, promising a hundred times if he had promised once that he wouldn't peek at her while she bathed.

After taking one last long glance, Kagome hesitantly dropped her arms. `*Do you want him to peek?*' She smiled as Sango's confused question echoed through her mind.

`*Of course not!*' she told herself even as a warm flush crept over her skin. She glanced back toward the shore before dropping under the surface of the water. InuYasha was nowhere in sight. `*Good,*' she told herself then sighed. If it was good that he wasn't looking, why did Kagome feel so disappointed? `*Oh, you're not disappointed!*' she berated herself. `*Stop being an idiot!*'

She resurfaced and reached over to retrieve her shampoo. With a mumbled, "Darn!" she realized couldn't quite reach the bottle without leaving the cover of the water. She shot a quick glance toward the shore, satisfying herself with the knowledge that InuYasha really wasn't watching. `*Probably sitting there with his arms folded together meditating, or whatever it is he does,*' she mused as she heaved herself out of the water and onto the rock to retrieve her shampoo as well as the conditioner.

An odd shiver raced up her spine, and Kagome cast a surreptitious glance toward the shore. Nothing struck her right away. Her chin lifted a tad as she narrowed her eyes. Yes, there they were. Sticking up behind a boulder on the shoreline was a pair of silvery ears. *‘Thought you weren’t going to peek, InuYasha,’* she thought with an inward, *‘Keh!’* She slid back into the water with a hiss as her skin scraped on the rock.

*‘Hmm,’* she thought as she crouched in the shallow water. In the pale light of the half-moon reflecting off the shimmering pool, Kagome saw the ears twitch. *‘Fine, if he thinks he’s going to peek after he promised he wouldn’t . . . He’ll just have to work for it!’*

With her knees bent so her body would stay under water, she skirted the rock so it would impede his view before she straightened up. Glancing out of the corner of her eye, she could see the ears sink quickly then rise again.

*‘You watched him this morning,’* her conscience reminded as she slowly lathered her hair. *‘And you liked what you saw, Kagome. Admit it. Fair’s fair.’* She flushed, remembering all too well exactly how much of InuYasha she had seen. When she first looked, he’d been covered up to his hips. She flinched when she saw the torn flesh on his stomach. He grimaced but seemed otherwise no worse for it as he sank back, content to let the water soothe him. Broad shoulders stretched, arched, and she watched, mesmerized by the way his muscles rippled under his skin. She’d seen his chest many times. How often had she had flashes of memories, of her tending his many wounds? With a slight smile, she remembered that it was rare when he’d show her how much pain he truly was suffering.

When he stood up, though . . . She really had tried to turn away from the window. She hadn’t meant to see what she saw. She’d heard the phrase *‘poetry in motion’* before. She hadn’t realized what it meant until those moments. Watching him stride toward the shore, the way his body seemed to flow of its own accord was beautiful to behold. There was something in his articulated movements, something graceful yet as hard to define as the wind that tossed his hair. He moved with the ease of agility, with the simple comfort of feeling no shame. She had been in awe . . .

Kagome sighed. True as that may be, she just couldn’t bring herself to let him see more than he should. She glanced down. She was completely covered, she figured. What he could see wouldn’t give him that much of a show . . .

Of course, he had seen her before, numerous times. But that was somehow different. She couldn’t exactly put her finger on the reason why, but it was. She made a face as she ducked under the water to rinse her hair.

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InuYasha frowned as Kagome’s head disappeared under the surface of the water. *‘If she catches you watching her, you’re going to end up with a faceful of dirt,’* he reminded himself. He deliberately ignored that voice of inner reason and leaned up to get a better view. She resurfaced

with her back toward him. In the moonlight, her skin seemed almost too perfect, too smooth, too soft. He bit his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood as his fang pierced the skin. He didn't notice.

His breath was drawn in so sharply that it whistled. Covered to the gentle swell of her breasts, InuYasha could still see way too much skin above the surface of the water. The rock hid her up to her shoulder blades. Unfortunately, what he did see was enough to set his heart thumping erratically in his chest. The shadows seemed that much starker in the dim light, and when she pulled all her hair over her shoulder to lather it a second time, he stared, enthralled by the gentle arch of her neck. Entirely too seductive in her innocence, he was unable to look away. She beckoned him, called to him, with every movement, the water's ripples spoke to him. Ethereal yet earthly, there was something about Kagome that transcended simple beauty into a realm of dreams and wanting. Conflicting emotion welled up inside, the need to cherish one such as her warred with the yearning to possess her.

An entirely primitive desire flooded through him as he continued to watch her. He didn't pay attention as he dug his claws against the rock, didn't feel them as they scraped, didn't realize as deep gouges were left in the wake of his trailing claws. Blood pumped through him, singing his veins, searing his flesh, tormenting his soul. *'Looks like another cold swim for you, baka. Did you watch her just to torture yourself?'*

"InuYasha?" she called over her shoulder. The moonlight played off her pale skin, lending her an iridescent glow, a delicate sheen. "You're not peeking, are you?"

He swallowed hard, a semblance of his common sense returning as he quickly ducked down. "Keh!"

She didn't answer right away. There was a slight hint of laughter in her tone when she did speak that made him flush. "Good, because I'd *know* if you were."

*'Would she?'* he wondered then wrinkled his nose. *'No way! She'd have osuwari-ed me for sure if she knew.'* He sat up to call over the rocks, "Need any help?"

"Nope."

He sighed. What was he hoping? That she'd say yes? "Hurry it up, will you?"

"I still have to condition my hair," she called back. "Why the hurry?"

*'Why? Because you're . . .'* InuYasha deliberately cut his train of thought off with a low growl. "It's getting late."

He heard another soft splash as she dunked herself again. Cautiously, he rose up to peer over the rocks again. This time, she sputtered just a little when she came up. He watched her wipe the water from her eyes with balled up fists and smiled to himself.

Kagome retrieved the pink net scrubber off the rock along with her bottle of body wash. She looked around slowly, as though trying to figure out if he was watching or not. Even with the distance between them, he could sense her uncertainty. He didn't miss her soft sigh as she squeezed out some of the washing liquid and set to work.

With a muffled moan, InuYasha dropped back onto the ground. There was no way he could watch her do that, he thought with a grimace. It was enough torture to have watched her wash her hair. To watch her wash the rest of her body . . . He sighed, letting his head fall back against the rocks as his eyes closed against the images that came to mind. That didn't help. It made them even more vivid. He'd seen those legs too often, too close, had caught too many glimpses of things he'd have been better off not seeing. The things that taunted him late at night as he held her close and breathed in her essence were the same things that were going to destroy him. How could a wisp of a girl like her bring him down? He sighed as another image crashed down on him. Kagome, so long ago, standing in the sage's dwelling, so happy to see that he was still alive that she hadn't thought to hide herself. What he had seen then had tortured him for a very long time. He sighed unsteadily, digging his fist into the ground. That single image still tormented him.

"Are you finished yet?" he called. His tone was harsher than he'd meant it to be, and he flinched.

"Almost."

He tried to will his mind away from what Kagome was doing, or, more precisely, what she was washing . . . Images continued to flash through his mind. He growled in frustration.

"Kagome?" She didn't answer. He waited a minute. "Kagome?"

When she still didn't answer, InuYasha sprang to his feet.

"Boo!" she yelled, springing up right in front of him on the other side of the rocks.

With a scream, he fell back. Kagome giggled softly. She ran around the boulder and knelt down beside him. "Did you *have* to do that?" he growled as he sat up.

"Sorry," she apologized, looking anything but sorry as she pulled on her sandals.

He eyed her suspiciously. How had she managed to get out of the water and get dressed without his knowing? Her hair was wrapped in a towel. He resisted the urge to grin at the endearing visage she presented. "Come on," he said as he pushed himself to his feet.

She dragged her backpack off the ground and slung it over her shoulder. InuYasha rolled his eyes and took the bag from her. "I can carry that," she remarked.

InuYasha snorted. "Keh! Don't be so stubborn. Let me help you, will you?"



## ~~Chapter 29~~

### ~A Hanyou's Truths~

“I can’t believe it,” Kagome marveled as she stared at Shippou. She grinned as though she couldn’t help herself.

Shippou shrugged and made a face. “I’m glad you’ve finally remembered. I have to admit, I was a little concerned that you never would.”

She giggled and patted Shippou’s hand. “Why were you able to conceal yourself from me better than the others did?”

“I don’t really know. Maybe because I’m a kitsune, and therefore more adept at deception?”

Kagome considered that as she straightened her shirtsleeve. She leaned her elbow on the patio table, resting her chin in her raised palm. “I *still* can’t believe it,” she commented again. “Little Shippou, all grown up and married . . . with children. They’re adorable, by the way. I just . . . wow!”

Shippou’s gaze shifted to the youngsters running around the yard. Toga chased after Shippou’s oldest child, a three year-old daughter named Nori. The girl squealed with glee as the younger daughter, Toshie, ran after them both. Aiko pushed herself into Kagome’s lap.

“I’m glad you’re here, Kagome. It’s been too long.”

She smiled. “It’s all still pretty fuzzy to me. But my memories are there. It’s just taking awhile to put them in order, I suppose.”

Shippou shook his head. “I’m just glad you do remember. We really worried that something had happened; something irreversible.”

Shaking her head slowly, Kagome frowned and admitted, “I still don’t know what caused me to forget . . . or how I could ever forget you guys. You were like a family to me, and I . . .”

“Don’t, Kagome. Don’t feel bad for something you obviously couldn’t control.”

She nodded though her expression was still distressed. She kissed Aiko’s cheek. Her smile returned.

“Where’s InuYasha?” Shippou asked suddenly, starting out of his reverie and dragging his attention off the children at play.

Kagome glanced up from Aiko’s downy-soft head and shrugged. “He said Sesshoumaru wanted to talk to him, but he wasn’t sure why . . .”

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InuYasha stared across the desk at Sesshoumaru with a look of undisguised incredulity on his face. It had taken awhile for the information to sink in, and now that it had . . .

“Close your mouth, InuYasha. You’ll catch flies that way.”

“You can’t be serious,” InuYasha said, his voice awed by what his brother had just so eloquently stated. “What you’ve said is . . . it’s *impossible!* That’s not . . . no . . .”

“It’s entirely possible. Myouga told me this.”

InuYasha leaned forward, elbows resting atop the polished coffee table and his face buried in his hands. “Anything else?” he muttered, his voice muffled by his hands. *‘Damn it, I sincerely hope there’s not . . .’*

“Ah, no. I believe that does it. You may go.”

InuYasha raised his head to glare at his deranged sibling. “Why do I think you’re enjoying this, you bastard?”

“Uncle Yasha!”

InuYasha looked up just in time to catch Toga as the youngster launched himself into his uncle’s arms. “Hey, Toga.”

Toga squirmed around to face his father though he remained on InuYasha’s lap with his plastic cup in one hand and a short, black, very fluffy Mokomoko-sama in his other. He leaned back to stare up at InuYasha before asking, “What’s a bastard?”

Sesshoumaru shot InuYasha a glower. “Yes, InuYasha. Why don’t you explain it to him? While you’re at it, why don’t you explain to his mother how Toga learned such a word?”

InuYasha schooled his features, very aware that Toga was still staring up at him with a rapt expression on his little face. “It’s a word I use to tell your father how much I like him,” InuYasha explained, narrowing his eyes slightly at his brother. “But not a good one to say to your mother.”

Toga nodded slowly. “So I shouldn’t tell Mama you said ‘bastard’?”

Sesshoumaru flinched. “Toga, come here.”

The boy scooted off InuYasha’s lap and ran over to Sesshoumaru, who picked him up and spared InuYasha a glower before turning his attention on his young son.

“Yes, Father?”

“If you promise never to say that word to your mother, I’ll take you to the toy store later, and you can pick out whatever you want.”

The boy was intrigued with this idea. “*Anything?*”

“Anything,” Sesshoumaru agreed.

“Okay!” With that, the lad hopped down and sped out of the room.

InuYasha couldn’t hide his amusement. “Resorting to bribery?”

Sesshoumaru made a face. “Not quite. More like full-out extortion, and the boy’s damn good at it.” He sat back in his thickly cushioned chair and steepled his fingers together as he regarded InuYasha with his amber eyes. “And when will you start your own family?” He leaned to the side long enough to stare pointedly at his calendar before resuming his perusal of InuYasha’s face. “Three days, if we go by this,” he remarked, nodding toward his desk.

InuYasha didn’t deign to answer. He stood up instead and stalked out of the room.

*‘You understand what I’m telling you, InuYasha? On those nights . . .’*

Sesshoumaru delighted in telling him all this, he didn’t doubt. It gave him a lot to consider; things he hadn’t realized needed to be considered before.

With a frustrated sigh, InuYasha jerked open the door that led onto the patio. He had known, when Sesshoumaru had ordered that he come by, that it wouldn’t be a pleasant visit.

Kagome was nowhere in sight. InuYasha frowned. He could smell her near. He just couldn’t see her. His ears twitched as he tried to hear her voice over the din the children were making with their play.

The wind switched directions, blowing Kagome’s scent straight to him. He smiled despite his otherwise nerve-racking thoughts and headed in her direction. She was still with Shippou. He’d figured as much.

He wandered toward the hedge and the bench that was hidden from view, where he knew Kagome was sitting. All he wanted to do was to gather her up and take her back home, as far away from Sesshoumaru and his damned words of wisdom as he could get.

Shippou's voice stopped him short, though, and InuYasha crossed his arms over his chest as he moved to be further upwind, hiding in the shadows of the gazebo, to listen.

“Why didn't you say goodbye, Kagome? I've always wondered that.”

Kagome's sigh was soft. “I don't know. I've remembered everything but that, I suppose . . . but I know it had something to do with InuYasha.”

From InuYasha's vantage point, he couldn't see Kagome's face. He muttered a few choice curses, though, when he scanned the area and couldn't find anything else to hide behind. For some reason, he really wanted to hear this conversation. Shippou stared down at Aiko, who was calmly sitting in Kagome's lap. “For the longest time, I thought you'd left because you were upset with us,” Shippou admitted. InuYasha flinched. Shippou hadn't told him this before. Then again, when had InuYasha ever bothered to ask?

Kagome stood up, cradling the child against her chest. Aiko was close to two years old. Kagome held her as though the girl was weightless. “I wish I knew why. I wish I could tell you all of it. I know it wasn't *your* fault. I don't think it was *anyone's* fault.” She turned to face Shippou. InuYasha could finally see her face. She looked confused. Slowly, though, the confusion was replaced with dawning apprehension, as though something was making sense to her, at last. “Kikyou,” she murmured. “I used the jewel to bring her back . . . for InuYasha.”

Shippou took a step toward her. She stepped back, shaking her head furiously. The onslaught of the memories, the pain in her expression was a viable thing. If only for the moment, she'd forgotten that InuYasha had come for her. If only in that second, all she knew was the pain of the decision she'd taken upon herself to make. “Kagome . . .”

InuYasha felt his heart constrict in his chest. As though he'd been yanked right back to that day, he couldn't help but close his eyes against the all-consuming torture that had shrouded him when he had awakened that morning to find Kagome gone. He started to leave his hiding place. Something in her voice stayed him, something poignant, something broken. “The well filled with water . . . I remember.” Aiko squirmed in Kagome's arms, sensing Kagome's distress. Kagome set the girl down and watched her go with a sad, distant look on her face. “How did InuYasha get through?”

“Kikyou opened the well.”

Kagome looked as though she was going to cry. Shippou wrapped an arm around her protectively. “Why? Why would she do that? She wanted to be with him, and he—”

Shippou sighed and squeezed Kagome's shoulders. “But he obviously wanted to be with you, instead.”

Kagome smiled though she still looked sad. InuYasha started out of the shadows. “What happened to Kikyou?” she asked.

Something about the way Shippou's head dropped, something in the slump of his shoulders slowed InuYasha's approach. The kitsune youkai sighed softly and shook his head, as though he didn't want to tell Kagome the rest of the story. InuYasha wondered if he really wanted to hear it, himself. "She died soon after she opened the well." Shippou sat down, as though telling the story was draining him mentally, the telling. "She collapsed right after InuYasha went through. Miroku and Sango carried her back to the village. She never recovered. Kaede said it took all of her spiritual power to open the well just for InuYasha. That's why I didn't go with him then. We were afraid . . . Kaede told me how hard it would be for Kikyou to do this, even just for InuYasha. It would have been selfish for me to go, too. I wanted to, I did . . . I missed you so badly . . . But . . . before Kikyou died, she told me that she'd never regret doing what she did, and that I should tell you to love him."

Kagome ducked her head and wiped her eyes.

InuYasha turned around and walked away. He'd never realized, never once stopped to think about what the consequences of his desire to get to Kagome would do to Kikyou. How could he have been so selfish? He made a face. Had he ever stopped to think about the consequences of his actions?

"Uncle Yasha? Where are you going?"

InuYasha forced a smile for Toga's benefit. Then he lifted the boy and leaped into the lowest branches of the nearest tree. Toga giggled. InuYasha leaned back against the tree trunk and pulled Toga close. As though realizing how far they were off the ground, the child sat still and sighed. "Why are you sad?" he asked in his high-pitched child's voice.

Throat raw, InuYasha had to swallow a few times before he trusted his voice enough to answer, "I just found out something . . . about someone I cared a lot about." He stared over the child's head searching the skies for resolution that wasn't there.

Toga nestled against InuYasha's chest. Suddenly, all he saw was black fur. He leaned to the side to glance down at the boy. Toga held up his Mokomoko-sama. "When I'm sad, I snuggle this. Do you want it?"

Slowly, InuYasha smiled. "Thanks, pup. This is yours, though. You'd better keep it."

Something about Toga's words helped to put things into perspective. The simplicity of a child . . . everything in black and white, and the ease in which sadness could be forgotten. There wasn't such a thing, he knew, as black and white in decisions, but to wrestle with the shades of gray left behind . . . what good would it do? He couldn't change the past now any better that he could before. To berate himself over things that he had no control . . . it wasn't fair to him, and moreover, it wasn't fair to Kagome.

InuYasha knew in his heart that he wasn't responsible for Kikyou's decision to open the well for him, any more than he could have changed the past to save her life the first time. He'd mourned

her long ago. He'd buried her long ago. He'd helped to bring an end to the one responsible for her real death, her first death. Naraku was dead. The bastard could never hurt another living being again, and that was enough. InuYasha had finally gotten to tell Kikyou goodbye before he'd leapt into the well. In the end, it had been enough.

From where he sat in the tree, InuYasha could see Kagome walking with Shippou. The two were talking quietly, and Kagome didn't look sad anymore. His smile widened.

"She's pretty, isn't she, Uncle Yasha?"

InuYasha glanced down at the child and followed Toga's gaze. He was staring at Kagome. InuYasha grinned. "No, Toga. Kagome's *beautiful*."

Toga leaned his head back to stare solemnly up at his uncle. "Father says Kagome is going to be your mate. She'll be my aunt then, right?"

Though not the first time InuYasha had stopped to think about spending a lifetime with Kagome, the word 'mate' shocked him, nonetheless. "I haven't asked her, no," he hedged, hoping the child would leave this line of questioning alone.

"If you make her your mate, then she'll be my Aunt 'Gome?"

InuYasha could feel himself blushing. "You ready to get down now, Toga?"

Toga shook his head. "I like it up here. Mama never—"

"I—nu—*Yasha!*"

He grimaced as Kagura's 'don't-you-mess-with-me' tone of voice drifted up to him. His grip tightened around Toga and he peered down through the leaves at his sister-in-law. "I wasn't going to let him fall," he remarked, trying to forestall whatever ear-blistering tirade he knew was coming. Toga squealed in delight as InuYasha hopped down. Kagura's indrawn breath was audible. She snatched her child away from him and moved Toga aside before stepping closer to InuYasha. InuYasha stepped back in retreat. "I swear, he was perfectly safe!"

"Oh, was he? You're not, not by a *long* shot." She advanced another step. InuYasha really hoped that she didn't have her wind fan on her, because if she did, he was as good as chopped liver. He couldn't hurt his own sister-in-law, and he didn't have the Tetsusaiga, either . . .

"Now, Kagura," he began, holding his hands out before him. Toga came running with Kagome and Shippou close behind. Kagome didn't wait to see what was going on. She pushed between InuYasha and Kagura, prepared to protect the hanyou from his own sister-in-law.

Kagura sighed and shook her head. "Don't do that again! He's a child, not a rag doll! Don't you have better sense than that?"



## ~~Chapter 30~~

### ~Dammit~

Kagome leaned idly in the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest. She stared thoughtfully at InuYasha as he sat under Goshinboku with Dammit by his side. Something was bothering him. She'd known it for the last couple of days, since they'd left Sesshoumaru's house. His preoccupation was a palpable thing. *'If he'd talk about whatever it was, it would help'*, she figured, but he was nothing if not stubborn, and when she'd asked him, he'd denied that anything was wrong.

The whistle of the teakettle on the stove broke through Kagome's musings, and she stared at InuYasha another moment before turning to head back through the house toward the kitchen.

It unsettled her, how quiet the shrine house was. Her mother, grandfather, and Souta had left town for a few days' vacation before Souta had to go back to school, and she smiled as she realized that, for the first time since she could remember, she didn't have to worry about her classes and things.

She poured tea for herself and InuYasha and stepped over to the refrigerator to retrieve the carton of milk. For some reason, InuYasha had gotten into the habit of putting milk in his tea. She made a face. If that's what he wanted, then she wasn't going to argue it with even if she found the habit a little weird.

Out of habit, Kagome lifted the open carton to her nose and sniffed. The date stamped on it claimed that the milk was still good. But she'd trusted the date before and had to spend a few days in the hospital because of it later. That had happened when she was ten. She'd sniffed the milk before using it ever since.

The carton smelled a little, though she couldn't decide if it was the milk that made it smell that way or the fact that this carton had been opened a few days. Milk rarely lasted long in their house. But with her family gone, this one was holding out well. She was still staring at the carton with a thoughtful frown when InuYasha stepped into the kitchen with Dammit in tow. Holding out the open carton, Kagome demanded, "Smell this."

His eyes narrowed as they locked with hers, and a little too late, Kagome realized that he had probably taken her request wrong. "Oh, I'm your fucking *dog* again, am I?"

"No," she hurried to say as she set the container on the table. "I didn't mean it that way! I smelled it, and—"

His snort cut her off. “And you thought, *‘Oh, why should I do this when I’ve got puppy-InuYasha running around somewhere?’*”

“I didn’t think any such thing! You know I never—”

“Keh!”

Kagome reached over and grabbed the hair that hung by his face. She pulled InuYasha forward a step as she tried her hardest to remember that he was already irritated and that he was very likely overreacting because of it. “Listen to me, will you?”

“Ouch! Let go, bitch!”

She tugged again though not enough to hurt him. His hands closed around her wrists and tightened slightly. She didn’t let go. Judiciously choosing to ignore what he had called her again, Kagome drew a deep, steady breath before stabbing him with a *‘don’t-you-dare-lie’* look and said, “Why don’t you tell me what’s *really* bothering you? You don’t get this upset about my asking you to sniff a carton of milk to make sure it’s still good. Why now?”

His glare didn’t diminish but his hands dropped, and he sighed. “Just give me the damned carton.”

Kagome’s hand dropped, and she gestured at the table before she turned to retrieve the sugar bowl. He wasn’t going to tell her. Whatever it was that bothered him, though, she had a feeling it had something to do with her, and everything to do with their visit to his brother’s house.

As she turned back to the table, she bit her lower lip, staring intently at the hanyou who had his nose practically stuffed into the milk carton. *‘You’ll tell me when you’re ready, won’t you, InuYasha?’*

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Kagome sat up and stretched as the end credits on the movie rolled. InuYasha was drowsing beside her on the sofa, his content rumbles filling the air with the pleasing sound. *‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’* she thought with a grimace as she pushed stop and rewind on the remote control. It seemed like every time she let him choose a movie, he ended up sleeping through most of it. Setting the remote on the coffee table, she then turned to stare at the sleeping hanyou. He’d barely said two words to her all evening since they’d arrived at his house after leaving the shrine.

His silvery hair fell over his cheek. Kagome smoothed it back, marveling in the wonder that she really could touch him, could be near him without feeling as though she didn’t have the right to do it. At times like this, when he was still, sleeping, it was easy to forget that she’d ever been at odds with him in the past. He looked innocent, naïve, with an understated gentleness. He hid

those things well when he was awake. But he couldn't hide those things from her. She ought to wake him up to go to bed, she mused. But he looked so comfortable, so content, she hated to do that.

Careful not to disturb him, Kagome got up and headed to the hall closet to retrieve a blanket. It wasn't cold. But the evening was uncharacteristically cool. She drew the blanket over him. He whined softly. She cupped his cheek in her hand. He nuzzled against her.

She didn't pull away from him until his low rumble resumed again. That sound, she knew, meant that he was happy. She thought back to the obvious preoccupation in his expression earlier and frowned. *What was eating at him?* she asked for what felt like the millionth time of the day. Then with a sigh, she ambled over to the doors that led to the deck and pond.

Glancing over her shoulder to make sure that she didn't disturb InuYasha's sleep, Kagome slid open the door and stepped outside.

*Too many stars to count,* she mused as she sank down on the stairs that led to the pathway. How many nights had she and the others sat around trying to count them all? Kagome smiled though the expression was tinged with sadness. Nights like tonight made her realize how much she truly missed Sango and Miroku . . .

She heard the door open behind her. She wasn't surprised moments later when InuYasha dropped the blanket over her shoulders instead. "What are you doing out here?"

She shot him a quick glance as he sat down beside her. "Did I wake you?"

He shook his head as he stretched, as though what little bit of a nap that he had gotten had rejuvenated him. "Keh! You know I can tell when you leave."

"Why is that?" she teased. He stared down at the ground, his hair falling so that she couldn't really see his expression.

Kagome reached over to brush back his bangs. Her sudden movement made him jerk back in surprise. He caught her wrist easily and scowled out of the corner of his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to see your face," she remarked. Why had her tone sounded so strangely breathless to her own ears?

His golden eyes seemed to darken in the bright light shining down from the moon and starts above. "Trying to read my mind, miko?"

Kagome grinned as he let go of her wrist. She reached over and rubbed his ear. He inclined his head toward her, encouraging her to continue as the low rumble started again. Kagome's smile widened. "I don't think I *can* read your mind," she confessed as she reached up with her free hand to capture his other ear. The rumble grew louder.

“Kagome?”

She didn't miss the husky quality in his tone. Her heart seemed to flop over in her chest.

“Hmm?”

“ . . . Are you sure you can't?”

Preoccupied with the whisper-soft hair on his ears as well as the lulling properties of his rumbling, Kagome didn't comprehend his question. “Can't what?”

She gasped in surprise as he reached up and pulled her hands away from his ears. Holding them between their bodies, InuYasha's eyes probed hers, taking no prisoners in his ardent perusal.

“Can't you read my mind?”

Her mouth fell slack as she stared at him, unable to tear her gaze away as she felt the molten gold seep over her, into her pores, into her soul. She thought maybe her heart had stopped until it suddenly lurched inside her, plummeting somewhere around her navel where an odd warmth was starting to flicker to life. His hands on her wrists burned her flesh but she didn't want to be let go, either. His face was a study of shadow and light, of deepest angles and planes that took on a bluish hue in the darkness. She couldn't speak, couldn't think, couldn't even remember to breathe. The look in his eyes dissipated any common sense she might have otherwise possessed, but in her muddled mind, the only word she knew was, “InuYasha . . .”

Vaguely aware as he pulled her toward him, she watched in unabashed wonder as InuYasha's eyelids drifted closed, his eyelashes fluttering like butterflies over his cheeks. Hers followed suite as a shocking heat engulfed her. Lips almost touching, she could feel his breath on her mouth. Anticipation was a bittersweet thing, and Kagome could feel the ever rapid thump of her heart against her ribcage as she waited to feel the magic of his kiss.

The obscenely loud scratching noise that cut through the moment drew a vicious growl of frustration from one of them while the other let loose a very loud, very irritated sigh. Strangely, Kagome wasn't sure which sound had come from her as InuYasha shot her an apologetic look before hopping up and jerking over the patio door. Dammit ran outside, barking and wagging her tail. The dog stopped to shoot Kagome what the latter could have sworn was a triumphant look. Kagome glared at the dog.

The moment was gone, and she knew it. She dared a secretive glance at InuYasha, who was sitting on the porch railing with his arms folded together and an angry look on his face. Yep, he knew it, too. Kagome sighed.

Dammit chased her tail in wide circles in the yard, barking happily and stopping only to cast Kagome the occasional glance. Every time the animal did, though, Kagome became more and more convinced that the dog was laughing at her.

Kagome growled to herself and shot to her feet, stomping back into the house to straighten up before bed. She had to be crazy; she decided as she snatched empty soda cans off the coffee table and headed for the garbage. Dammit was just a dog, after all. Dogs didn't *have* human emotions.

She froze in her tracks as her eyes darted toward the back door. She dropped the cans into the trash and leaned back against the counter with a defeated sigh. It was entirely possible, she realized. If InuYasha, who was a dog-human hanyou, could experience human emotions, then it was entirely likely that Dammit could, too.

Kagome was washing up the few glasses in the sink when InuYasha and Dammit came back into the house. He spotted her right away as he dropped the unfolded blanket on the sofa. "Leave them, Kagome. The housekeeper will get it in the morning."

"That's okay. You don't need her, you know," Kagome pointed out in a reasonable tone. "I don't mind helping you out around here."

InuYasha snorted in response as he rummaged around in the refrigerator. "When you move in here, I'll get rid of the housekeeper," he remarked.

Kagome froze. *Did he just say what it sounded like he said?* She forced herself to finish washing the glass in her hand as she fought to make her heart slow down. InuYasha leaned against the counter, patiently waiting till she finished her task. "You joke too much," she remarked, trying to hide the telling redness creeping over her skin.

"Who's joking? You might as well move in. You're here all the time anyway, and you belong here."

She swallowed hard. "I can't, InuYasha. It isn't right. I mean, we're not even—" Face shooting up in flames, Kagome realized too late exactly what that sounded like. It sounded like she was fishing for a commitment from him . . . She bit her lip, concentrating instead on not sticking her foot in her mouth any further than it was already embedded. She reached out to turn on the water so she could rinse the sink. InuYasha was faster.

He didn't wait for her to rinse out the sink. He grabbed her wet hand and dragged her down the hallway. "What's your rush?" she asked but didn't try to pull away.

InuYasha tossed a quick glance over his shoulder at her. *Is he smiling?*

"I'm tired. What of it?"

Her eyes narrowed and she stopped. He finally turned to face her, his expression completely innocent. "You're *never* tired, InuYasha."

"I thought you said you trust me."

"I used to."

“Used to?”

She grinned. “Yeah. Used to.”

“What does that mean?” he asked, the timbre of his voice dropping, picking up on the teasing note in her tone.

Kagome shrugged, struggling for a nonchalance that she was far from feeling as she leaned against the wall for support and InuYasha placed a hand on each side of her head. “I . . . I thought you were supposed to protect me,” she said, her voice airy, breathless.

He chuckled, leaning toward her so that his hair brushed against her cheek, and his voice rumbled low in her ear, sending shivers down her spine as her knees threatened to give out. “From what?”

“ . . . You.”

“Me?”

“Y—y—yes.”

He chuckled again. “Why are you stammering?”

She didn’t answer. She could feel the blood shooting to her face. Still, she couldn’t speak. He sighed, pushing away from the wall. He grabbed her hands and backed into the bedroom. Her knees wobbled. She hoped he didn’t notice. The knowing look he shot her, though, convinced her that he did.

He let his head fall to the side but continued to stare at her through half-closed eyes. *What has gotten into him tonight?* she wondered. Earlier in the day, he’d definitely had something on his mind. Now, though, he seemed perfectly normal, if not a little . . . unnerving.

“Come here, Kagome,” he said softly though his tone was awash with quiet authority.

That odd explosion happened again in her belly. Kagome could feel her entire body trembling. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to move. It was that she actually couldn’t do it. If she moved so much as an inch, she’d crumble into a thousand pieces, shatter into more shards than the Shikon no Tama . . .

He must have sensed her inability to move, because Kagome gaped at the speed with which he crossed the room to her, sweeping her into his arms as though she weighed nothing.

“InuYasha? What—”

His lips cut off her question. Searching, scorching, whatever Kagome had been about to ask slipped away from her as his fangs drew over her lips, as they nipped at her gently, and yet she could feel the raw power behind it all, the consuming need for him to devour her. Whatever had brought about the sudden change in him didn't worry her. Nothing did. He was InuYasha. He wouldn't hurt her. He'd never do that.

He let go of her legs but didn't put her down. He held onto her, holding her close. But he trailed his claws on his free hand up her side, against her flesh. A caress that normally would have tickled her instead drew a soft whimper from her. InuYasha growled low in response but never removed his mouth from hers. Ravaging her senses, barraging her judgment before she could muster a defense, his lips were powerful, all the more potent in their soft exploration.

Another growl broke through Kagome's misty veil, and as it grew more threatening, more insistent, she dragged her lips away from InuYasha's and peeked around him in the direction of the noise. Either he didn't notice or didn't care because instead of paying attention to see what had distracted her, InuYasha let his mouth fall to the small hollow at the junction between her neck and her shoulder. She gasped but her eyes flared wider when she spotted the dog crouched in the middle of the bed, ready to spring on her.

"Dammit," she whispered. InuYasha's rumble started up again but he didn't bother to comment. Kagome closed her eyes just for a moment as InuYasha's fangs grazed over the tender skin of her neck. As shocking as the sensation was, as heady as his deliberate seduction, she couldn't quite forget the sounds coming from the dog on the bed. As much as Kagome wanted to let herself get lost in his attention, the dog bared her teeth once more and let another low growl. "Dammit," she said, this time a little louder.

He pulled away just a little and stared down at her with a thoughtful frown. "Did I hurt you? Kagome?"

She leaned against him, her limbs still too lethargic to work the way they should have. "No," she said with a slight shake of her head. "Dammit."

For some reason, InuYasha looked a little insulted. "If you wanted me to stop—"

Kagome shook her head adamantly and waved her hand toward the bed. "No, it's *Dammit!*"

A look of complete confusion crossed InuYasha's features. But his eyes narrowed as understanding seemed to dawn on him, and he slowly turned his head. Dammit wagged her tail at him and whined in greeting. He turned back to face Kagome again, still apparently not understanding what had truly been bothering her. "She'll move."

Kagome rubbed her hands over her face, suddenly feeling very tired. She didn't feel like explaining the dog's threatening behavior to InuYasha. She didn't even know if he would believe her, since Dammit was trying her hardest to convince him that she was being nice. He seemed to sense the change in Kagome's mood, though. He shooed Dammit off the bed and reached out to catch Kagome's hand and draw her forward. "Come on. You're tired," he said with a sigh.

She lay down and curled up as InuYasha hauled her into his arms. “Your heart’s thundering,” she said softly after he turned off the light. Her hand rested on his chest. InuYasha tilted her chin up and kissed her.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her.

She snuggled against his neck, completely missing the disgruntled look on the hanyou’s face and oblivious to the uncomfortable shifting as he tried to maneuver into a less distracting position. “Sleep well, InuYasha.”

Her answer was a heavy sigh.

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Kagome moaned and tried to burrow deeper into InuYasha’s shoulder as the incessant thumping that had roused her grew louder and louder. She sat up and yawned. Beside her, InuYasha bolted off the bed and out the door, muttering dire threats as he disappeared from view.

Letting herself flop backward on the bed, she wondered briefly who was here. But she was feeling entirely too lethargic to get up.

“Kagome!”

Kagome glanced over just in time to see Toga launch himself from midway across the floor straight onto the bed. Aiko wasn’t far behind. Kagome was buried under the children, and she giggled as Toga hopped up and down. “What are you two doing here?” she asked as she kissed Aiko’s alabaster cheek.

Toga dropped to his knees and cocked his head to the side as he stared at Kagome in an entirely unsettling manner. “Father wanted to asked Uncle Yasha somefin.”

“Why do you look so serious?” she asked as she pushed herself into a sitting position. “Are you okay, Toga?”

Toga started bouncing on his knees, almost as though he was nervous. “Yeah,” Toga said in a tone that suggested that he wasn’t.

“Are you our aunt now, `Gome?” Aiko piped up.

Kagome’s eyes bulged out. “*What?*”

“Baka!” Toga yelled, in obvious distress. “We weren’t supposed to ask! That’s why Father—”

“Not baka!” Aiko yelled back, those golden eyes of hers flashing with anger directed at her brother.

“Are too!”

“Am not! Toga’s a baka!”

“Calm down, both of you,” Kagome tried to intervene.

“*You* are!”

“*You* are!!”

“*Baby!*”

“*Baka!*”

Kagome glanced over as InuYasha, Sesshoumaru, and Kagura stepped into the room with varying degrees of shock in their expressions. Sesshoumaru looked the least impressed with the outburst. Kagura looked minimally irritated. InuYasha looked stunned.

“This Toga is not a baka, you *baby!*” Toga hollered.

“This Aiko is not a baby, you *baka!*” Aiko screamed back.

“*Baby!*”

“*Baka!*”

“*Bastard!*”

“*Toga!*” Kagura gasped, dragging the children off the bed to stand before their father, who was now looking distinctly uncomfortable. “Where did you learn that word?”

Kagome’s gaze narrowed as InuYasha backed slowly away from Kagura and Sesshoumaru. “Uncle Yasha,” Toga grumbled as he stared at the floor. “He said it was his way of telling Father how much he cares about him.”

Kagura’s eyes shot to pin InuYasha to the spot. “InuYasha . . . God only help you when you have children of your own,” she said, glowering at the hanyou in such a way that InuYasha flinched and stepped back again. “Come, children. I think it will be a very long time before we leave you with Uncle Yasha again.” She stomped out of the room.

Sesshoumaru turned to follow but stopped, cocking his head to the side before leaving. “Children are so impressionable. Miko, I trust you’ll keep your children away from their father, should the desire to pass on his deplorable vocabulary strike him?”

Kagome's mouth dropped open as she watched Sesshoumaru's silent retreat.

*'What in the world were they all talking about?'*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

## ~Chapter 31~

~Uzumaki~

Kagome sighed and rested her cheek on InuYasha's shoulder. He grinned, arms tightening as he held her before launching himself and her off the ground and into the trees. Dammit barked as she ran along on the ground. Kagome giggled. "Don't drop me," she remarked.

InuYasha snorted. "Keh! I thought you trusted me?"

"I do," she answered lightly, hugging him just a little tighter. "But the ground is a long way down."

"I'm not sure if I'm supposed to take offense to that or not," he commented. She didn't miss his smile despite the disgruntled tone in his voice.

She leaned in closer, shifting her head so that her chin rested on his shoulder. "I'll just have to hang on tighter, then, won't I?"

"Oh, no, I think I'm going to drop—" InuYasha loosened his grip on her for a split second. Kagome didn't even blink. They'd played this game a few times too many in the past. InuYasha's smile faltered. She never had fallen for the trick.

*'You've got to tell her. She has a right to know what last night was about,'* his conscience chided. InuYasha sighed. How was he supposed to explain to Kagome something that he wasn't fully able to explain to himself? He'd been awake the better part of the night trying to work all of it out in his head. It still didn't make any sense to him. With an inward snort, he wondered if it ever really would.

He lit on the ground on the edge of a clearing, and she slid off his back as she slowly turned her head, surveying the small meadow with an appreciative smile. He took Kagome's backpack before she was able to rummage around in it to see what he had packed.

She stepped over to him, reaching for the edge of the blanket that he'd pulled from the bag. He jerked it out of her reach and frowned. "Go pick flowers or whatever it is you girls do," he remarked in a purposefully gruff tone.

Kagome giggled, as though the idea that he'd presented hadn't occurred to her. "I haven't picked flowers since I was little."

InuYasha shook out the blanket and shrugged. “Take Dammit for a walk, then. You two need to spend more time together, anyway.”

He didn’t see the reluctant look Kagome shot him as he flicked the blanket again. It floated slowly to the ground. When he glanced over where Kagome had been, he saw her walking away. Dammit was staring at him in a decidedly irritated manner. “You need to make friends with her,” he told the dog. “Don’t look at me like that.”

The dog stared at him another long moment then heaved a snort meant to show her dissatisfaction before turning and stalking off after Kagome.

He gazed at them, his eyes tinged with a hint of sadness as he watched Kagome sit down on a rock. The edges of her blue skirt caught the breeze, lirting like a flag. With every movement she made, her scent shifted, teased him. Everything about her called to him, the invisible hands of a very real muse.

*‘How can I tell her?’* he asked himself yet again. He’d been asking himself that for the last four days. That he’d already been thinking about it had been bad enough. But to have it all so eloquently stated for his benefit by Sesshoumaru, of all people . . .

InuYasha sat down on the edge of the blanket and started to pull more items out of the backpack. The trouble was that it wasn’t an easy to understand as Sesshoumaru had made it out to be. Last night had proved that to InuYasha, hands down. He hadn’t been *able* to control himself. There was something about Kagome, about himself—about *them*—that had clouded over his better judgment, had precluded his reservations. He’d reacted to her on a purely primal level, and it had taken everything within him to leave her alone in the night. Thinking back on how he had behaved . . . He scowled as heat filtered to the surface of his skin. He’d acted like . . . well, like a *dog*. Kagome hadn’t remarked on it. But surely she’d noticed his strange behavior, too.

If he had any idea where to begin forming a reason, it would be a lot easier. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a clue. One explanation hinged on the other, and it was all jumbled in his head. *‘New moon . . . full moon . . . and those nights between . . .’*

Sesshoumaru’s words came back, as fresh in his mind as though he’d just heard them, *‘Youkai choose, InuYasha. Hanyous cannot, not really.’*

His eyes closed against the words that echoed in his mind. *‘Sesshoumaru is wrong,’* he thought defiantly. *‘This hanyou . . . I’ll choose.’* The scent as soft as a gentle spring rain assailed him. He knew that scent as well as he knew his own, perhaps better. *‘Kagome . . .’* InuYasha’s eyes snapped open, his stare immediately lighting on the woman invading his thoughts. He deliberately pushed aside the guilty pang at his own selfishness. Surely Kagome would understand. She always understood.

*‘How many more sacrifices are you going to ask of her, InuYasha?’* another voice spoke to him. *‘How many more times are you going to ask her to give up something she desires in hopes that you’ll be happy, for a time? Can you not see what you’ll be asking of her?’*

He sighed and scowled at his bleak thoughts. He was fully aware of what he'd be asking of her. Wasn't that the real reason he was so reluctant to bring it up?

The sound of Kagome's laughter brought him back to his senses. She dropped onto the blanket beside him and held out a bouquet of flowers. InuYasha could feel his face redden as he slowly took the offering. "Why are you giving me flowers?"

"You said to pick them," she pointed out reasonably, leaning over him to retrieve her bag. "So I did. Besides, I've always wondered what you'd look like, with flowers in that hair of yours."

"What am I supposed to do with these?"

She ignored his surly tone as she pulled out their lunch. "Put them in your hair?"

"Keh!"

Dammit loped up to InuYasha and laid her head on his shoulder. She leaned in closer to the flowers, sniffing them gingerly. InuYasha held them up more so that Dammit could better smell them. The dog growled and snatched the blooms, yanking them out of InuYasha's hand and shredding them before he could even think to stop her.

Kagome's soft gasp drew his gaze, and slowly, hesitantly, he shifted his eyes to look at her.

She wasn't crying but she looked like it was a close thing. Quickly she blinked, her shock rapidly giving way to indignation. InuYasha braced himself for whatever was coming next. "I didn't mean for that to—"

As fast as the emotion had come, Kagome blanked her expression. "Forget it. It was stupid, anyway." She hurriedly thrust a container of food at him. "Here. You're probably hungry."

She was putting on a happy face, just for him, and he knew it. Why did it always make him feel like such a fool when she did that? He watched in silence as she opened her container and stared at it for a moment before she got up and offered the food to Dammit. "Kagome . . ."

Dammit's lips curled back and she snarled at Kagome just before snapping her jaws viciously. Kagome yelped and jumped back, stumbling over the edge of the blanket. InuYasha barely had time to toss his food aside as he shot to his feet. Dammit lunged. InuYasha caught her as Kagome covered her head and shrieked.

"Dammit!" he hollered, reigning in the desire to heave the animal. *'Forget that,'* he thought as he ground his teeth together so tightly his jaws ached. It took another minute for him to realize that the visceral growl that filled his ears was coming from himself. *'I'm going to rip her fucking head off. . .'* After shooting Kagome a quick glance to make sure she really was all right, he dragged the dog away, only dropping her once they were reasonably far from Kagome. "What the *hell?*"

Dammit wouldn't meet his glower. He cracked his knuckles in warning. The dog shot him a scared glance and whimpered.

"Talk fast, Dammit, before I break your fucking neck," he growled.

Dammit whined again and shook pathetically. *'Her-r hur-rt Lor-rd Dog mor-re, always mor-re.'*

"Have you been threatening her all along, even when I told you not to?" InuYasha demanded, his voice low, rumbling, intimidating.

She dared another look at him but dropped her gaze immediately when she saw InuYasha flexing his claws again. *'No mor-re,'* Dammit promised with a soft whine. She hadn't missed the tell-tale flash of red in his eyes. *'Mer-rcy, Lor-rd Dog.'*

InuYasha shook his head. "I've told you. That's not Kagome. She's not to blame for anything. She didn't do a thing. What is your problem?"

Dammit just whimpered.

His anger waned just a little, enough that the desire to kill the dog had diminished. "If you so much as growl at her, ever again, I swear I'll fucking kill you, myself," he warned. "I won't choose between you and her, Dammit. There's not a choice. It's *always* been Kagome. She's my mate."

The dog's head shot up to stare at him before dropping quickly once more. InuYasha didn't realize exactly what he'd said for a moment. When it hit him, his eyes rounded, and he glanced over at Kagome to make sure she hadn't heard his words.

She sat huddled on the blanket in the same place where he'd left her with her arms wrapped protectively around her legs and her face buried in her raised knees. Without a second thought of the dog, InuYasha broke into a run, stopping only when he'd reached Kagome's side. He dropped to his knees beside her, touching her shoulder, smoothing the hair away from her face. The sight of the tears he had smelled nearly undid him. "Kagome? Why didn't you *tell* me?"

She didn't answer. A choked sob escaped her and InuYasha caught her as she threw herself against him. Smoothing her hair, murmuring in her ear that she was safe, that he'd never let anything hurt her like that again, InuYasha felt a merciless stab in his heart. He'd protect her, even if it cost him everything he had. But could he protect her from himself?

Slowly, she quieted. He shifted and pulled her closer. He couldn't see her eyes since she sat with her head against his chest. But her nose was red, and every now and again, she'd shiver when she tried to draw a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. She won't do it again."

Kagome gasped and sat up quickly. "You didn't . . . InuYasha . . . Tell me you didn't hurt her."

He couldn't help the incredulity in his expression as he gaped at Kagome. Had she lost her mind? Dammit had tried to attack her! Or did she really not understand? Either way, she'd been sobbing so hard, she had to have known something . . . but what? "I didn't hurt her," he began slowly, unable to keep the trace of irritation out of his tone. "But she tried to . . . Don't you realize what she was going to do?"

Kagome's gaze fell to her hands, clenched in her lap and she scrunched up her shoulders. "But she didn't, InuYasha . . . and I think . . . she was trying to protect you, is all."

His anger dissolved but left behind frustration that Kagome would still protect the dog. "I don't *need* protecting, especially from you."

The tears still standing on her spiky eyelashes glistened like diamonds in the sun. The salt in the moisture tickled InuYasha's nose. As he leaned down, Kagome's eyes fluttered closed. He slowly kissed away the dampness, feeling the traces of salt on his lips. She sighed against him, relaxed into him, asked him to shelter her without speaking a word.

One claw idly traced her jaw line as his lips rained down over her face. She shivered in his arms. He pulled her closer. Her mouth sought out his. The connection forged between them shot through his body and into hers. The temperature of her body was rising. Her flesh burned under his fingers, even through the layer of her clothes. He could hear her heart beating in an unpredictable pattern that tightened around his stomach like a fist, a pressure that was both wonderful and terrifying at the same time. The fragrance of her—of her tears, of her body—wrapped around his very soul.

He lowered her gently, leaned over her, kissed away her sighs, her moans. She tasted like everything pure, everything fresh, the morning dew on his tongue. His palm flat against the burning flesh of her belly, the material of her shirt teased the back of his hand. Sucking on her lower lip, grazing his teeth and fangs against the tender skin, he heard himself growl softly. It was a sound he'd never made before, an intonation that was foreign to him. He flexed his claws against her. She shivered again.

Her arms wrapped around him, held him close, as though she needed to be as near to him as she could be, she held him. She clung to him, her actions telling him how much she trusted him, needed him. Everything about her was paradox in motion. Soft and gentle, teasing and kind, she yielded to him with an underlying demanding, a silent hunger that drove him onward.

An odd sound penetrated his mind, a vague recollection of a shadow of a noise. It reminded him of something he didn't have the concentration to place, the whisper of a breeze, the flutter of a feather . . . something soft, something warm . . . something . . . that was Kagome. The sound came from her, a gentle whine, imploring him to give her something that he didn't understand any more than she did.

With the last traces of his sanity, InuYasha leaned away, gasping for air, eyes closed. There were things she didn't know, things that he had to tell her . . . Kagome whimpered softly, her hand idly toying with the hair that had fallen over his shoulder. When he finally trusted himself to look

back down at her, he regretted it almost immediately. Her eyes burned into his, half closed, she stared up at him through her eyelashes. The way she looked at him made him want to forget the things that needed to be said. She swallowed hard, and her face flushed as she cleared her throat to say, “Why did you stop?”

With a sigh, InuYasha sat up and looked away. “We need to talk.”

He felt her sigh more than he heard it. She sat up, too, her hands folded together in her lap. “All right.”

“If we . . . what we were . . .” Dragging a hand over his face in exasperation, he berated himself, *‘Spit it out, will you? You’ve got to say it. Just say it.’* He shot her a quick look. She was staring down at her hands. He couldn’t see her eyes. “I want this, Kagome. I want us. But you’ve got to be sure you want it, too, because . . .” he trailed off, unable to finish his thoughts when he didn’t have a clue what she was thinking.

She finally turned her head and stared at him. Her expression was solemn but not unhappy. He took courage from that, drawing a deep breath before plunging on. “Because once we’re *together* . . . I’m half human, it’s true, but I’m also half youkai, and when youkai mate, it’s for life . . . and because, for me it’s got to be forever with you. If you choose to be with me, Kagome . . . I wanted you to know.”

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## ~~Chapter 32~~

### ~Waking from a Dream~

“You’re not going over to InuYasha’s house this evening?” Mrs. Higurashi asked as Kagome rinsed out the sink and slipped the bottle of cleanser into the cupboard below.

“Um, no. Yuki, Eri, and Ayumi were coming over. You know, one last girls’ night before they head off to the university,” Kagome replied as she rinsed out the sponge.

“Well, it’s rather nice to have you home for once.” She wiped off the table then glanced over her shoulder at her daughter. “I trust InuYasha will be over later, then, too?”

Kagome’s hands stilled in her work. Her mother didn’t miss her hesitation. “He didn’t say, but yes, I think so . . .”

“Kagome . . . is something bothering you?”

Kagome shot her mother a quick glance. Mrs. Higurashi was paying extra attention to a spot on the table. Kagome sighed then smiled slightly. Ever since her mother had slipped the journal into her bag before the trip to the beach with InuYasha, Kagome had felt almost as though her mother was becoming more of a friend than an authority figure in her life. It was a subtle shift, yet one that she welcomed. Most mornings when she stayed at the shrine, she’d carefully extricate herself from InuYasha’s arms and creep out of the room so that she could sit with her mother and sip tea while they talked about anything and everything.

She took heart from her mother’s constant optimism, and, she realized, she could benefit from it now, as well. “There’s something on his mind, and he doesn’t want to tell me what it is.” Mrs. Higurashi laughed softly. Kagome frowned. “What’s funny about that?”

Mrs. Higurashi hugged Kagome quickly and dropped her cleaning sponge into the sink. “Kagome, like women, men sometimes have secrets, too. Trust him. He’ll tell you when he’s ready.”

Kagome sighed. “That’s what I thought . . .” She watched absently as Mrs. Higurashi dug around in the refrigerator, pulling out items to make up a snack platter for Kagome’s friends. InuYasha’s words echoed through her mind again. *‘Because, for me, it’s got to be forever with you. I wanted you to know.’* She smiled then bit her lip thoughtfully. “He did say something . . .”

Mrs. Higurashi glanced up from the tray preparations. “What’s that?”

Sinking down at the table, Kagome grabbed a carrot and idly chewed it before gathering the courage to tell her mom. “He said that he wanted us to be `forever’. I’m just not sure exactly what he meant.”

“You mean, he asked you to marry him?”

Kagome made a face. “Well, no.”

Mrs. Higurashi leveled a no-nonsense look at her daughter. “Exactly what did he say?”

“He said that for us it would be forever, and that he wanted me to know that.”

Mrs. Higurashi crossed her arms over her chest and smiled. “Dear, have you ever considered that InuYasha may not know about marriage? He is a hanyou, right? Maybe their rituals are different.”

“Maybe.” She sighed again. “He, uh, has mentioned my moving in with him.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

Kagome could appreciate the restraint her mother showed. More than likely, Mrs. Higurashi was ready to blow a gasket at the idea of Kagome moving in with InuYasha, as if she wasn’t already with him most of the time most every day. “Maybe,” she admitted, “if the time is ever right. Right now, though . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t want to rush anything.”

Mrs. Higurashi looked very relieved. “I’m glad you’re such a level-headed girl, Kagome. Have I told you that lately?”

Memories of her feelings whenever InuYasha kissed her, or even looked at her, really, assailed her. She had a feeling that Mrs. Higurashi wouldn’t be so impressed with her daughter if she knew about that . . .

“You’ll know when the time’s right, I’m certain, and I trust you to make decisions on your own.”

Kagome sighed. She hoped that her mother was right. Her judgment was always a little clouded whenever InuYasha was near. She grinned though and was stopped from replying, though, when the doorbell rang. She hopped up and kissed her mother’s cheek. “Can we finish this talk later?”

Mrs. Higurashi turned back to her work. “Of course, Kagome. Now answer that because I’m sure it’s for you!”

Kagome ducked out of the room and ran for the door.

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“I can’t believe you’re not coming to the university with us,” Eri remarked with a disappointed sigh.

Kagome shrugged. “I’ve registered to take a few classes here.”

Yuka shook her head. “That’s not the same.”

“It’s Mr. Izayoi, isn’t it?” Ayumi asked quietly, averting her gaze and picking at an imaginary bit of fluff on her skirt. “He won’t let you go, will he?”

“What do you mean, he won’t *let me go*? InuYasha wouldn’t stop me.”

Her friends exchanged knowing glances while Kagome fought back her irritation. Ayumi nudged Eri. Eri made a face. “Houjou said Mr. Izayoi was manhandling you outside the mall.”

“He wasn’t!” Kagome insisted, waving off her friends’ concern. “InuYasha just doesn’t like Houjou, that’s all, and can you really blame him? Houjou doesn’t know when to lay off the `my woman’ crap.”

The girls didn’t look convinced. Kagome rolled her eyes. “Let’s talk about something else, okay?”

“What the *hell* are you doing *here*, Kagome?”

Her back stiffened at the angry tone in InuYasha’s voice. She turned to stare at the irritated hanyou. “InuYasha? I told you this morning that my friends were coming over for a girls’ night.”

“Keh! Maybe you ought to wake me up before you tell me something like that,” he remarked, still looking quite disgruntled. “I got up this morning, and you were gone.”

“I had things to do earlier,” she explained as she stood. “Anyway, you looked like you were sleeping peacefully. I didn’t have the heart to wake you.”

He smiled faintly at her words. “I just . . . like waking up with you,” he admitted, apparently forgetting that Kagome’s friends were still sitting on the floor with varying degrees of shocked expressions.

Kagome grinned and leaned up to kiss his cheek. “I’m going to go get the snacks,” she explained. “Be right back.”

It didn’t take her long to retrieve the tray of vegetables that her mother had prepared earlier.

She was greeted by her friends’ disapproving stares. InuYasha sat on the floor against the far wall with his arms folded together and a mulish expression on his face. Kagome could only

assume that whatever had been said while she was gone hadn't been good. "Here," she said, sitting down the tray.

"What's going on between the two of you?" Yuka questioned casually—*too* casually—as she picked through the celery.

'*Why do I feel like I missed something?*' Kagome asked herself, eyeing her friends' carefully averted faces. "What do you mean?"

"You're just not the kind to *sleep* at some guy's house, is all," Ayumi remarked.

"You dated Houjou for two years and never even *kissed* him," Eri added.

Before she got a chance to form a reply, though, InuYasha shot forward, planting himself between Kagome and her friends. "What are you implying?" he demanded, his voice a harsh growl.

"It's not like that!" Kagome insisted, pushing herself up on her knees to see over InuYasha's shoulder. "Nothing's going on!"

The girls looked confused.

"I don't think I like what they're saying about you, Kagome," he said slowly.

She rubbed his back idly, trying to soothe him. "It's okay. They're not insulting me."

He turned to stare at her, those lazy amber eyes blinking, shining. Kagome grinned as her heart beat increased. He reached over and smoothed back her hair.

Suddenly, Eri clapped her hands, hopping up and down in excitement. The others looked at her as though she'd lost her mind. "My sister's getting married!"

The girls screamed. Kagome hopped up to hug Eri as InuYasha scooted out of the way. "When are they getting married?" Yuka asked.

Eri waved her hands to quiet the girls. "They want to wait till spring. There's always such lovely weather then for weddings!"

The girls let a collective sigh. Yuka looked dreamy as she asked, "Is it going to be a big wedding?"

"Of course it is," Ayumi put in. "All girls want a huge wedding!"

Kagome shook her head slowly, "Not all girls. I think I'd rather just have something small, here at the shrine, with just family and close friends."

Her friends looked appalled at the very idea of such a small gathering. “Oh, Kagome! You’re kidding!”

She frowned. “I’m not! Besides, if it was too big I’d be worried about something going wrong instead of concentrating on what’s actually happening.”

Eri grabbed a carrot. “You’ll change your mind, I’m sure . . .”

Kagome stifled a sigh and turned to glance at InuYasha. He had an odd expression on his face. He looked duly perplexed, and she sank down next to him. “What’s wrong?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head slowly, turning his puzzled expression on her. “What’s that mean?”

Ayumi frowned, staring at InuYasha as though she was trying to decide whether or not he was joking. “You don’t know what getting married is?”

Again, he shook his head, looking even more irritated. “I know what it is,” he said with a snort. “I just hadn’t really thought about it much.”

Yuka giggled. “Well, of course not, unless you and Kagome—” She stopped laughing and stared thoughtfully at InuYasha. “*Have* you been thinking about marriage?”

“Anyone we know?” Eri asked with a devilish smile.

“Look at the time!” Kagome said loudly, making a show of checking her watch. “Ayumi, isn’t your mom coming to pick you guys up?”

Ayumi checked her watch and hopped up. “You’re right! I’ve had such a good time, Kagome! We’ll have to do this again when we’re between classes!”

Kagome walked her friends to the door and wished them good luck with their studies. With a sigh of relief, she turned to go back inside. InuYasha stepped out onto the porch, pulling the door closed behind him. “You want to stay here tonight?”

She smiled, hands clasped before her, head tilted to the side. She scooted her toe back and forth almost bashfully, but her eyes were bright when she dared to look up at him. “It doesn’t really matter to me, as long as I’m with you.”

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InuYasha stared out the window at the setting sun. The skies, painted in the mournful colors of early evening, settled over him with a distinct melancholy. They’d returned to his house shortly after her friends had left, and since then, he had smiled for her, laughed with her, and yet he

knew that she could feel his underlying turmoil just beneath the surface, like a beast fighting to expose itself to the world.

*'The answer is always the same,'* he thought dully. *'It doesn't matter how many times I try to look at it differently, I can't . . . not even for Kagome.'*

"It's not going to go away if you don't talk about it," she remarked softly, a forced optimism in her tone, a gentleness that made him cringe. She hugged her knees as she turned on the sofa to offer him her full attention.

InuYasha shook himself, as though he had forgotten that she was even there. He hadn't, not by a long shot. How could he do that when the one thing that troubled him involved her, too? Without a word, he turned slightly though his eyes remained averted. "Tell me what you want, Kagome," he said, his voice soft, searching.

His question confused her. She shook her head slowly and let her chin rest on her knees. "What do you mean?"

He had to tell her. He didn't have a right to keep it from her. There was too much at stake, things that InuYasha hadn't even thought of until recently, things that he wasn't sure he could bear. On the one hand, the idea of hurting her, of seeing her sadness and of knowing that he was the cause had the power to destroy him. On the other hand, the idea of what the alternative could be . . . He closed his eyes, unable to even think of what the alternative had the power to do.

And yet it wasn't his decision that worried him. As he shifted his gaze out of the corner of his eye to watch the woman who sat in silent confusion, his heart broke just a little more. *'I can't ask this of her . . . It's not fair to her, and I . . .'* The voice in his mind had been right days ago when it had scoffed at him. Could he really ask her to sacrifice anything more for him? *'What if she cannot do it?'* InuYasha steeled himself as the edges of panic curled over his mind. If she couldn't accept it . . . *'I'll let her go.'*

"I didn't tell you everything," he admitted in the quiet. He could hear the clock on the mantle ticking. The sound thumped like a hammer in his head. "There's something else you need to know."

Kagome's chin rose slightly, her expression clouding over even more, as though a sense of foreboding was taking shape in her mind. He flinched and shifted his gaze back out the window. "Okay."

*'Just say it, baka! Stop avoiding it and just say it! She'll react the same no matter when you say it, so you might as well just spit it out.'* He sighed. "I don't want pups."

He could sense her shock without seeing her face, could smell the swing in her emotions almost better than he could if he looked at her. He heard her shift her position. Then she choked out an incredulous laugh. "Well, no, not right away," she agreed. "We are still young."

He swallowed hard, balling his hands into fists as though trying to hold onto his own resolve. Shaking his head slowly, he could sense her worry rising. “I mean, we *can't* have children. Ever.”

“This is the modern era, InuYasha. Doctors work minor miracles all the time. Surely we could—”

He finally turned his head, pinning her with a pleading stare, one meant to beg her to understand, to know what it was that he was feeling, the fact that simply telling her this much was obliterating his heart. “No, Kagome . . . We could *have* children. There’s two times every lunar cycle that it’s possible. On the night of the new moon, when I turn human, you’d have a human child. But on the night of the full moon . . . The child would be hanyou, like me.”

“The full moon . . . Is that why you were acting so strange the other night?”

He sighed. “I think so. It’s not important. Do you understand? *I don't want children. Ever.*”

She whimpered softly, the back of her hand pressed to her mouth. She shook her head slowly, as though she didn’t believe what he was saying. He flinched, her pain a tangible thing. Crossing the floor, he dropped to his knees beside her, begging her to understand. Tears stood in her eyes but they didn’t fall. He reached for her hand but couldn’t bring himself to touch her. “Kagome, listen to me . . . It’s not that I don’t *want* children. I just . . . because I . . . But you know what my childhood was like . . . I can’t . . . “

It shot to the fore with a vindictiveness that cut him deep. He was that child, all over again, the one who no one wanted. Humans despised him for being half youkai. Youkai loathed him because he was weak, because he possessed human blood. Being alone, with no one and with nothing . . . This was the only legacy he could offer his own children. It was something that he couldn’t do.

Kagome reached out to him, brushed his hair out of his face, tried to rub his ear. He pulled away and shoved himself to his feet. He tried to speak but his voice was caught behind a fist-sized lump that he couldn’t swallow. Every second that she stared at him, every moment that she stubbornly stood by him, because of the promise she’d made to him so long ago . . . For her sake alone, he forced himself to whisper, “I think you should go.”

She got up slowly. He didn’t face her. He didn’t need to. He could hear her. “InuYasha?”

Her hand on his arm shot an aching hurt straight through him. He’d lost her. He could feel it. Why wouldn’t she leave? “I won’t hold you to your promise,” he said softly, broken, defeated. “Go home.”

She didn’t move as the clock ticked so slowly. He heard her soft sigh, her muffled sob. He squeezed his eyes closed as another wound opened up somewhere deep inside, a wound that no one would ever see.

It wasn't until he heard the front door close softly that he whirled around.

She was gone.

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Kagome walked home slowly, as though her legs refused to run. She felt numb, felt nothing, as though InuYasha's words hadn't permeated her mind.

He hadn't really wanted her to leave, had he?

*'Tell me what you want, Kagome.'*

She choked back a sob but the tears wouldn't come. What did she want? He had to *ask* her that?

*'InuYasha.'*

It had always been InuYasha. She couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been her world, her universe.

But what he had told her . . . It was something that she'd always wanted, ever since she could remember. A family of her own, children of her own . . .

He offered her half of that. He offered her himself. She shook her head and slowly sank down on the ground beneath the canopy of a gnarled old tree. Could she be happy with a portion of that dream?

Yet could she stand to be without him? Could she bear not to be with him?

A sob welled up in her throat, creating an ache that wouldn't go away. Which hurt worse? InuYasha's words? Or that he had so readily shoved her away, believing the worst in her? Still, she couldn't answer that, either.

For so long he'd been part of her, a part that she'd sooner die than give up. Worse than having the memories of everything coming back to her, worse than the fear of forgetting it all over again, this one ache grew steadily worse, rose up in her. Her heart swelled, larger and larger, and then she could feel the pieces crumbling away as the moon in her dream crumbled to dust. He'd almost let her touch that moon. He'd almost managed to propel her to heaven. The whisper of the birds' wings, the secrets that they knew, the magic of flight, the taunting of the moon. *'You'll never reach me, Kagome. How dare a human hope to touch something so perfect, something so rare . . .'*

A soft whine, a cold nose nudged at her hand. Kagome gasped, her hot, dry eyes landing on the white dog. She started to panic, tried to push away from the animal. Dammit stepped closer, and



## ~Chapter 33~

### ~Kagome's Decision~

InuYasha held up the Tetsusaiga in the late afternoon sunshine. The rusty old blade was dull, cold, unable to offer him any sort of peace. The feeling that he would protect the frail human who had come to trust him, whom he had come to cherish, was gone.

Tetsusaiga had forever been the catalyst, marking first the desire in his heart to shelter Kagome from anything or anyone who attempted to harm her. Yet as he learned, as he mastered his own nature, the sword had grown in power, as well. *'And now,'* he realized with an incongruously ironic half-smile, *'now the blade ignores me.'* Now the Tetsusaiga refused to hear him. He had failed. It wouldn't transform.

With a sigh, he dropped the sword into the scabbard. Even the sword's aura seemed to be gone. *'I've broken the promise I made to you, haven't I? The promise of the hanyou to shield the miko . . . the promise I made to Kagome.'*

His body ached. He'd spent hours in that tree, watching over Kagome as she had wept. How many times had he nearly called out to her? With every tear she had shed the pain in his spirit had magnified. He had wanted to go to her, to tell her that he'd give her his life if she would stop crying. Yet he couldn't. He didn't deserve the comfort in that.

She'd finally fallen asleep under that tree, her small form so lost, so alone, even protected as she was, with Dammit guarding over her. The dog, he understood, had sensed her pain, had known that Kagome's heart was breaking. When InuYasha had dropped from his perch and approached, intending only to take her home, Dammit had been the one to bear her fangs, to tell him that she wouldn't let InuYasha harm Kagome, not any more.

In the end, though, the dog had let InuYasha lift the woman into his arms and had trailed after as he had slowly walked with Kagome. The miko's energy she carried inside, the invisible barricade that surrounded her, had pulsed with her heartbeat. Designed to keep Kagome from physical hurt, the barrier had burned him. But he hadn't let her go. He couldn't leave her alone.

He put Kagome to bed and had spent the rest of the night sitting on her windowsill staring at her. She hadn't moved at all in the night. Had she even known that he was there? Did he want her to know?

Images in his mind tortured him, visions of Kagome, playing with the pups they should have had. How many would she have wanted? InuYasha sank down, his back against a tree trunk, the Tetsusaiga wrapped in his arms, and with the knowledge that the sword didn't offer him a bit of

comfort, not any more. In his mind, he could hear her laughter. The young ones shrieked with happiness, a sound he never knew as a child. When he approached them, though, all the smiles faded, the laughter died, and they stared at him reproachfully, as if they'd known that, because of him, they never had a chance.

*'It was the right decision,'* he told himself over and over, chanting the words that didn't comfort him at all. He didn't have the right to pass on the curse, the stigma . . . Being hanyou had never been anything but heartache to him. Kikyou had wanted him to be human, and though her reason was pure, InuYasha had sensed, too, that it would have made things easier for her in the end. He would have done that, sacrificed the part of him that was youkai for her. He would have done that, not because Kikyou couldn't accept him as a hanyou. She had. No, he would have done it to make her life a little simpler. That would have been easy, but with Kagome . . .

She deserved so much more, more than he could offer her. How stupid had he been, to think that he could give her what she wanted, what she needed. A fool's hope, maybe. Kagome inspired that in him. He wanted to give her everything, he wanted her to have it all. Her hopes, her dreams, they were more important to him than anything else. How could it be that the one thing that he couldn't offer her could be the one thing that would end up destroying them both?

He closed his eyes against the hot sting of tears that wouldn't come. His eyes throbbed with the desire to shed tears. His soul wouldn't let him. The harm he'd dealt Kagome was too great for that. What she wanted from him was so much more than him giving up a part of his spirit, and even if she had been able to accept his decision, he hadn't had the right to ask her to do it.

The beginning and end of it was that InuYasha would give anything he could give to make Kagome happy. If she asked him to slay a thousand demons, he would do it. If she asked for the moon in the night sky, he would find a way to get it for her, but children were different. He didn't have the right to do to them what had been done to him. The life of a hanyou was one that simply wasn't designed to be happy. He would have roamed the earth for the five hundred years to get to Kagome. This was the one thing he could not do.

"Ah, there you are. Why is it that you don't care for the house I had designed for you, little brother? Something wrong with the Tetsusaiga?"

"If you came by to taunt me, then you might as well go. I'm not in the fucking mood."

Sesshoumaru clucked his tongue. "Touchy, are we? Have a falling out with the miko? Where is she, by the way?"

InuYasha didn't look at his brother. "What do you want?"

"Something amiss, InuYasha?" Sesshoumaru challenged.

"I'll ask once more, Sesshoumaru. What the hell do you want?"

Sesshoumaru chuckled, deliberately provoking the hanyou. InuYasha knew the game. That didn't stop him from rising to the bait, though. "Do I need a reason to come visit my baby brother?"

InuYasha finally shifted his gaze over to pin Sesshoumaru. Golden eyes met, silent challenge extended. "You *always* have reasons. Now spit it out, will you?"

"You win." Sesshoumaru made a show of staring at his claws, turning his hand over a few times as he examined them from different angles. "I came to ask you about the panther youkai that attacked the miko the day she got her memories back. Did he say anything to her or to you?"

"You came all the way over here to ask me *that*?"

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Don't be flip, baka. Hyou's been telling the human authorities about the youkai, and he's been giving out names, yours included."

InuYasha grimaced. "The humans won't do anything. They're not going to believe a hell a nasty bastard like him, anyway."

"Hyou was the one who was responsible for the human muggings. Most of the authorities he's told don't believe him. Youkai must submit to human law, InuYasha. In order to hide the youkai who remain, it must be so. This bastard, as you call him, must be taken care of before he talks too much."

InuYasha got slowly to his feet, staring at Sesshoumaru as he tried to figure out where this conversation was heading. "What does this have to do with me?"

"Much has changed in five hundred years, InuYasha. Youkai take care of our own problems, yet we live in a human world. Understand, we will take care of this deviant panther, but in order to do that, allowances must be taken. This panther youkai must be freed before we can stop him."

"Still not seeing a fucking connection."

"Don't be a baka. He'll come after you. He will come after the miko."

"I thought you said no one believes him."

Sesshoumaru's smile was overly indulgent, like one he would give an errant child. "I said not *many* believe him. I never said that *no one* does."

InuYasha growled softly. "I'll tear him apart if he comes after Kagome."

Sesshoumaru sighed then nodded once. "I thought as much. I must warn you, though. You may do as you will with him. If he came after Kagura or the children . . . Well, I see why you feel this way. Just make sure that whatever you do decide to do? Make certain that human eyes do not witness it. It's less complicated that way."

At the mention of Kagura and the kids, InuYasha's frown deepened. Sesshoumaru turned to leave. InuYasha stopped him. "Sesshoumaru . . ." The tai-youkai stopped and turned back to face InuYasha again. "Tell me something. You and Kagura have been mated since we defeated Naraku, right?"

Sesshoumaru shook his head and made a face. "We call it marriage nowadays, InuYasha, but yes, it was shortly after that."

InuYasha waved off Sesshoumaru's chiding. "Why'd you wait so long to have Toga and Aiko?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Many reasons . . . After Naraku was destroyed, the world of the youkai started to change. His supporters, though few and basically insignificant, had to be dealt with. Because of what Naraku had done, there was even greater fear of the youkai. When gunpowder came, youkai extermination became something more of a threat. We allowed ourselves to fade into memory and reemerged only recently. So the idea of having children was a little less palatable then . . . And there were other reasons, as well."

"Like what?"

Enigmatic smile in place, Sesshoumaru stared over the landscape with a discernable distraction, an air of near sadness. "Family, InuYasha. After you'd gone through the well, I realized a few things, among them, that I was the last of our father's line. I wanted my children to know their family."

InuYasha snorted indelicately, unable to keep the antagonism out of his tone as he rolled his eyes at his half-brother. "Keh! You waited to have pups till I arrived? I don't believe that."

Sesshoumaru's gaze shifted to rest on InuYasha. He raised his eyebrows. "Think what you will. It matters not to me what you choose to believe. A baka rarely sees truth."

"How long has it been since you've been in a fight?" InuYasha goaded, cracking his knuckles as he glared at his brother.

Sesshoumaru rolled his eyes. "Not nearly as long as you might think. In any case, I must be off. Oh, and for the record? Toga's still young. Should something happen to me, you would become tai-youkai—hanyou or not—at least, until Toga comes of age."

"What?"

Sesshoumaru didn't falter in his stride as he tossed his final words at his brother. "Farewell for now, InuYasha . . . Remember what I told you."

InuYasha watched in stunned silence as Sesshoumaru disappeared around the side of the house. With a distinct frown, InuYasha tried to make sense of his brother's commentary. It was

impossible. Family? Tai-youkai? Kagome? *`Damn it . . . Why does that bastard always have to speak in riddles?`* he fumed as he flopped back down. *`Fuck Sesshoumaru, anyway . . .`*

*“He will come after the miko.”*

InuYasha didn't notice the vicious growl that escaped him. He didn't feel the surge of fire rip through his veins at the idea of Kagome in any sort of danger, whatsoever. His eyes glowed red for a moment, then back to the molten gold. With the beat of his heart, his eyes fluctuated. InuYasha's growl intensified. “Let him come,” he muttered softly, the yearning for a decent fight precluding thoughts of anything else. *‘Maybe,’* he thought with a grimace, *‘if I can save Kagome, just this one last time . . . Maybe she can forgive me.’*

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He awoke with a start. He hadn't realized he had even dozed off. The sun was starting to sink on the horizon. Clouds had rolled in while he had been asleep. The wind had a peculiar bite, a bitter edge. It suited his mood nicely. The whisper of the breeze spoke of impending storms to come, of a tempest that would ravage his soul. InuYasha deliberately ignored the warning.

He yawned. What had roused him? The whine, the whimper came to him as the scent permeated his senses. Dammit stepped out of the shadows, her eyes sad, accusing. He looked away as guilt shot to the fore again.

Dammit came around and sat patiently beside him, as though waiting for him to notice her. With a heavy sigh, he asked softly, “How is she?” but didn't look at the dog.

The dog whined, lifting her paw and waving it at him. Rebuking him?

He grimaced. “I know; I'm the bad guy.”

“You're not, you know.”

With a soft gasp, InuYasha shot to his feet. Kagome stepped out of the shadows of the trees where Dammit had emerged. She stopped, hands clasped before her, her pink dress blowing in the wind. It had carried her scent away, allowing her to sneak up on him. InuYasha stared, unable to believe that she was there in front of him. “Kagome . . .”

“I thought about it, about what you'd said,” she interrupted, her voice soft, barely discernable. “I thought about a lot of things. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to hate you. I've always wanted a family. But as much as I wanted that, I . . . well, I understand how you feel because I know you.”

He took a step toward her. She retreated. He stopped. He owed it to her to listen to the rest of what she had come to say. “Go on.”

Dammit trotted over to Kagome, leaned against her leg, offering her support with her presence. Kagome petted the animal's head before speaking again. "It's because I know you that I know you wouldn't have said what you said if you hadn't given it a lot of thought. I know you meant it, and I know it hurt you to tell me . . . but . . . I can't remember a time when I wasn't with you, and I can't stand the thought that you won't be there tomorrow, or the next day, or . . ." her voice broke. InuYasha flinched, the quiet sorrow in her tone destroying what was left of his already tattered soul. "Don't you know . . . ?"

"Kagome, you don't—"

"No, I do . . . I do. You've never tried to be something you weren't, and you've never, ever lied to me. InuYasha . . . I . . ."

The quiet pleading in her expression brought him to his knees. He dropped before her, reached out for her, arms around her hips as he buried his face in her stomach. Her arms wrapped his head, cradled him to her. The hot tears that he'd wished for all day poked at his eyes, blurred his vision. He tried to blink them back. They dampened the front of her dress.

She held him that way for a long time. He didn't make a sound. If he opened his mouth—if he gave into the desire to give any sort of voice to his emotion—he'd shatter . . . But Kagome understood. She always understood.

Finally, she pushed on his shoulders, pushed him back just enough that she could kneel down before him. She kissed his forehead, smoothed the hair off his face, wiped his tears. He tried to smile for her. She grimaced, and he knew he'd failed.

"I'm sorry," he said, closing his eyes against her gentle smile that, for reasons he didn't want to think about, made him feel even worse.

"Don't be sorry," she countered. "There never were any guarantees."

"I want to give you everything, and if I thought I could—"

"I know. It's okay. I've never wanted you to be anything that you're not." He stared at her for a long moment, wondering what it was that he had done right in his life to deserve to have her near. "I'd never ask you to do something you can't. You must know that."

"Are you sure? I really can't ask you to do that."

"If the alternative is being without you, InuYasha . . . And you're not asking. I'm offering."

He reached out, tracing her jaw with the tip of his claw as she closed her eyes. Just for a moment, though, he could feel her upset. The voice in his mind told him he was being selfish, stubborn, holding onto her because he couldn't stand to let her go, that his unwillingness to contemplate Kagome's own wishes was going to destroy them both.



## ~Chapter 34~

### ~Rituals~

“InuYasha . . .”

He peeked over from where he stood at the back doors staring out at the overcast skies. Static electricity crackled unseen in the air. InuYasha could feel the storm coming. Feeling altogether energized, restless, he'd wanted to go running through the forest in this. Kagome, however, had looked at him as though he had lost his mind when he'd suggested it before. The excitement was a palpable thing. He reveled in it.

Something had shifted, changed, and as much as it pleased, him, he also felt a strange sense of loss. Somehow Dammit and Kagome had become the best of friends, and InuYasha was the one who was the outsider. Kagome was staring at Dammit, touching the animal's stomach in an unusual way that drew InuYasha's frown. “Something wrong with Dammit?”

She shot him a quick glance and nodded slowly then shook her head. His frown intensified. “Not *wrong*, exactly . . . She's pregnant though.”

InuYasha choked on the sip of water he'd just taken. Kagome eyed him cautiously as he spit and sputtered, wiping his chin with the back of his hand. “*What?*”

Kagome tried again. “Dammit's pregnant. *Very* pregnant, it looks like.”

“Keh!” he snorted. “She can't be! I'd have noticed . . .” He trailed off. With as preoccupied as he had been recently with the issue of starting his own family, would he have noticed that Dammit was about to have pups of her own? He sighed, knowing the answer. Probably not. He pushed against the doorframe and wandered over to Kagome and Dammit. “So, Dr. Kagome. When's she going to have these pups, then?”

Kagome grinned. “I'm not a doctor, so I couldn't tell you. But she's starting to get pretty big, so I'd say soon?”

She turned her attention back to the dog, tucking her hair behind her ear as she bent over. InuYasha stared in complete fascination at the delicate arc of skin. He reached out with a claw and gently flicked it. She smashed her ear against her shoulder and shot him a teasing look. “That tickles!”

“Does it?” he countered, leaning in closer. One hand shot out to catch her around the waist while the other fought to make her lift her head so that he could get to her ear.

She laughed harder as she leaned over to smash her ear against her shoulder even tighter.  
 “*Stop!*”

He flicked her earlobe again. She shrieked, immediately trying to shy away from him as his ears flattened against her shrill cry. It didn’t work to block the sound. *Flick*. “Beg for mercy, wench,” he remarked.

“Mercy, mercy, *mercy!*” she giggled.

With an exaggerated sigh, his hands dropped. “You give up too easily, Kagome.”

Her eyebrows shot up at the quiet challenge. “Do I? You’re no better!” To prove her point, Kagome rose up on her knees and grabbed InuYasha’s ear. He knew what she had planned. He tried to scoot away from her. She lunged at him, straddling his chest as she pinned his arms under her knees. She leaned forward, grasping his ear in one hand and lightly running her finger along the fine hairs inside.

He shivered, he whimpered, he whined. Kagome didn’t stop. “*Kagome!*”

“Mercy, InuYasha!”

He growled at that. It wasn’t in his nature to beg for mercy from anything, and he wasn’t about to start now. She shifted her body slightly. InuYasha groaned, but this had nothing to do with his ears and everything to do with how she had him pinned. The smell of her invaded his senses, and he stifled the all-too-real desire to reverse their positions, to make her understand what it was that she did to him so easily. InuYasha made quick work of freeing his arms. Grasping her around the waist, he slid her down as he sat up. She landed in his lap. He was no less disgruntled, especially after catching the bemusement on her face after he’d finished moving her. The air around her crackled with her aura. It invited him, called to him. Did she know?

A tremendous crack of thunder overhead rattled the house and dampened his mood as Kagome flung herself forward against him. Her heart hammered wildly against him. She’d never been overly frightened of storms before though he had noticed more than once that they tended to make her anxious. But he’d heard on the news that this one was supposed to be bigger, apparently the biggest tropical storm to hit Japan in over a hundred years. “You’re not scared are you?” he asked, brushing the hair out of her face and turning her chin up to meet his stare.

He saw the conflicting emotions in her eyes. ‘*Yes, she’s scared,*’ he thought with an inward flinch as a bolt of lightning followed by a huge thunder crack sounded off again. But her courage was rising, and Kagome shook her head stubbornly. He had to admire that in her. Admitting fear . . . Well, the Kagome he knew wouldn’t.

“Come on; let’s find something to take your mind off this, all right?” He started to get up while holding onto Kagome. Then he realized what he had said, the implications of it. He nearly dropped her. “I, uh . . . that’s not what I . . . I meant . . .”

She reached up and tenderly rested her hand on his cheek. "It's fine."

He set her down on the sofa and leaned over to look in her eyes, a suspicious light behind his gaze. "Are you all right?"

Kagome sighed and smiled. It didn't reach her eyes. "Do you think the police were right? Do you think that Hyou will come after us?"

InuYasha sank down and drew Kagome close. She laid her head against his chest, soothed by his heartbeat. He could feel her relax in his arms. She might be worried that the deviant panther youkai would come after them. But she also had every faith that InuYasha would protect her. "He might. I'll keep you safe if he does."

She sighed again, only this one was a contented sound. "I know. You promised, didn't you?"

He smiled wanly, reveling in the complete trust she showed in him. "I did. I will."

"You gave me your fire rat kimono," she said softly.

InuYasha kissed her forehead. He could feel her resolute belief, her unwavering certainty that he would protect her from anything. He wanted to shelter her, to keep her safe. He would, he vowed again. If the panther youkai came after her again, InuYasha would kill him, no questions asked.

A muffled shriek was forced out of her as another, more ominous crack of thunder sounded overhead. Seconds later, the lights flickered out. The calm that had surrounded her moments before was a distant memory, and InuYasha tightened his hold on her. "It's okay, Kagome. Let me see if I can find some candles or something."

"No!" she hissed in a whisper as he started to extricate himself from her grip. Her eyes were wide, wild. Her skin was peaked. But it was the gentle pleading in her voice that made him relent. "Don't leave me here!"

In the dusky light that was left in the room, InuYasha tried to stare at her. He could smell her anxiety. It wasn't actual fear, though that seemed to be close at hand, as well. "All right . . . what about a fire? Would that be better?"

Kagome thought it over then nodded, her hold on his shirt immediately loosening.

He made quick work of that and turned back to face her. She sat on the sofa with her legs folded beneath her as she stared out the window with an unsettling mix of anxiety and horrified fascination in her expression. "You want I should draw the curtains?" he asked mildly.

"Wha—?" She dragged her eyes off the window and forced out a half-laugh. "I'm fine, really! Everything's safe. Nothing can get me in here, right? It's all just as well. Storms don't frighten

me. They never have!” She laughed again. “It’s stupid to be frightened of something like that, isn’t it?”

She was babbling? He grinned to himself. He didn’t remember ever hearing her do this. But she was talking a mile a minute, and if he didn’t do something quickly to redirect her thoughts, then she’d probably continue to do it. Slowly, deliberately, he wandered over to the sofa and sank down beside her again.

“—And the time you spend on them is just a waste when, really, all you have to do is sit down and talk about it, you know? Because most often—”

InuYasha sighed as he reached over and pulled her close, kissing her soundly, kissing her completely, cutting off her frivolous chatter. She leaned into him, her hands slowly reaching up, twining into his hair. With a low growl, InuYasha felt her press against him, her body warm, soothing, and yet wholly unsettling. If he lost himself in her forever, he didn’t think he’d truly care. And yet, there was an intense ache, a burgeoning need. More thunder snapped, and Kagome shivered. He calmed her with his soothing rumble.

Her lips pulled away, trailing to his jaw line. InuYasha fell back on the sofa. Kagome didn’t lose contact. “Ka . . . Kagome . . .” Concentration slipped a little further away, and he gently brought her face up to his again, kissing her lips, tasting her. He flicked out the tip of his tongue against her mouth. She whimpered softly, lips parting, begging him silently for whatever he was willing to give. He shifted them just enough that he could lean over her. He pulled back, staring down at her. The look she had on her face was the same as the day in the meadow. Desire drove her as it had then, drew him in, captured him. Breathing became rapid, shallow; she stared at him, asking him to love her, demanding that he show her . . . Tracing her cheek, feeling the softness of her flesh beneath his fingers . . . Kagome’s eyes drifted closed as she concentrated on the feel of his touch. Did she have any idea how very precious she really was to him?

His fingers trailed from her cheek, running along the warm skin, straggling down the curve of her neck, the line of her shoulder. Through the fabric of her thin summer dress, he could feel the tell-tale bumps well up on her body in reaction to his touch. It gave him a heady feeling, the sensation of power, and yet his own body trembled, his breathing rough, superficial. Slowly, deliberately, InuYasha willed his heart to slow from the rapid wash of blood coursing through him as he trailed his claws down along her side to her hip, resting over the gentle hollow of her stomach . . . and the spot. He could feel it pulsing under his fingers, calling to him. He’d been told that the spot was different, varying from female to female. On some it was the neck. Others would be the shoulder . . . and for Kagome it was the thin silvery scar where the Shikon Jewel had burst from her body.

He looked back up into her face. Her eyes were open again. She stared at him through her heavy eyelids, asking him in that look what he waited for, what was holding him back? InuYasha sighed, steeling himself for what he had to do. Yet as he looked into her eyes and remembered that promise he’d made to her so long ago he sat up quickly, sighing in consternation.

“What’s wrong?” she asked softly, slowly sitting up, her hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

He shook his head slowly, as though he couldn't believe it himself. But there it was, the ugly truth of it. "I can't do it," he admitted, his tone as bewildered as his expression. "I . . . I have to, but I can't."

"Can't what?" she asked slowly, shaking her head. "InuYasha? I don't understand."

He flopped back on the couch and pulled Kagome back into his arms. She nestled next to him and kissed his cheek. He smiled despite his dark thoughts. "Just something . . . I don't think I'm ready to do it yet."

"And you can't do this thing? Why?"

He made a face and tightened his grip on her. "Because . . . I just can't do it, not yet."

"If it bothers you, can't you just *not* do it?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't have to worry about it yet. It's okay."

"Sometimes, though, it is best to get things out of the way that you don't want to do."

"Nah," he said, willing the concern in her expression to fade. "But I got your mind off the storm, didn't I?"

With a gasp, Kagome sat up and stared at InuYasha as though she wasn't sure whether to laugh or hit him. In the end, she just sputtered in righteous indignation. "That's what—? You mean to say you—? *InuYasha!*" She started to climb over him. He caught her hand and pulled her back down.

"Come here, stupid girl."

"I really ought to go home," she pouted.

He laughed. She wouldn't do that in this weather, anyway. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I don't get called 'stupid' at home."

"Would you really leave me?"

She grinned slightly. "Hmm."

"Kiss me."

"What?"

"You heard me."



## ~Chapter 35~

### ~Forbidden~

Kagome rolled over, propping her head up on her hand as she stared at InuYasha. He heard her move and glanced over his shoulder, shooting her a guilty look as he buttoned up the snowy white shirt. Leaving the top two undone, he sank down on the edge of the bed and reached over to stroke her cheek. “Did I wake you?”

She nodded but smiled as he made a face. “I knew you got up, is all.”

“For the record, I’d rather stay here with you.”

Reaching out to finish the task of fastening his shirt closed, Kagome sighed. “I’ve got a class of my own today, and you told Kagura you’d fill in.”

He grinned as she yawned. “Be careful, then,” he said, his tone harsh even if his expression wasn’t. “That panther youkai is sill out there, and I want you to promise you’ll watch out.”

She reached over to rub his ear. He leaned toward her, letting his eyes drift closed for a moment as he savored the touch. “I promise, but I don’t think he’d try anything in the middle of Tokyo. It’d be pretty stupid, actually.”

“Stupid or not . . . You’ve got your cell phone?” Staring at him with a strange mix of humor and incredulity on her face, Kagome burst out laughing, flopping back on the bed though her eyes didn’t leave his. “What’s so funny?” he asked, his tone bordering on insulted.

Kagome stopped laughing though her eyes were still shining bright. “It just struck me as amusing; your asking if I have my cell phone, is all. You used to make fun of the things I’d bring back with me, you know.”

He smiled despite himself. “Some of your things are actually useful. Don’t let it go to your head.” He leaned in to give her a kiss. Her arms slipped around his neck, holding him to her as the intention for a quick goodbye faded. He tasted vaguely of toothpaste—bubblegum child’s toothpaste with extra fluoride—and something far more visceral, heady. A familiar burst of heat shot through her. Kagome’s arms tightened. “Fuck the school,” he muttered between kisses.

Kagome giggled, effectively bringing a halt to the kisses. His forehead dropped to her shoulder in defeat, and he sighed. Her giggling escalated at the tickling sensation of his breathing. “You’re going to be late if you don’t get moving,” she remarked, winding a lock of his hair around her finger.

With a few more choice curses, he rolled off the bed and headed for the door. He paused before leaving though, to direct one more warning at her. “I mean it, Kagome. Be careful.”

“And I mean it, InuYasha. You’d better control your language around those kids today or there may be some fairly unhappy parents if their children come in swearing. I know I’d be upset if you talked like that around our—” She cut herself off quickly with a smothered gasp, her eyes skittering away from his. *‘What are you thinking, Kagome?’* she berated herself. *‘He’s going to think you were hinting, and . . . and you agreed. No children.’* She flinched at her own thoughts. “Sorry,” she said, her voice strangely high pitched, too cheerful. “I don’t know what I was thinking . . . Anyway, you’d best go. You can’t be late on your first day, right?”

She didn’t lift her gaze from her bare feet. She didn’t need to. She could feel him staring at her. She willed her heart to slow its nervous pattern, berating herself for what she never should have said . . .

Finally, she felt him leave, drawing away from her through the quiet house. Moments later the front door closed softly, and Kagome let out a disgusted sigh. “Baka!” she muttered as she rolled off the bed and headed for the bathroom. *‘Maybe you mentioned it because you’re hoping that he’ll change his mind.’*

Kagome frowned as she stripped off her clothes and turned on the shower tap. That wasn’t it. She wasn’t trying to change his mind about anything. *‘It was my choice, to come back,’* she reasoned. *‘I don’t have a right to try to ask him to change his mind, even if he hadn’t already said how he felt the idea. As far as I’m concerned, the entire subject is forbidden.’*

Letting the warm water cleanse her bleak thoughts away, Kagome sighed. InuYasha had never told her that they couldn’t talk about it. But she just couldn’t bring it up again. The sadness on his features when he had told her . . . she refused to be the reason he felt like that, no matter how she felt about it.

*‘Things are so different now than they were when he was a child,’* her mind argued. *‘What he went through was awful, but doesn’t he realize that humans deal with youkai here every single day and just never recognize it?’*

It wasn’t as easy as that, though. She knew how deep the wounds went in him. It had taken so long to get him to open up about much of anything. Bad enough to have never known his father, but to have lost his mother so young as well, and all because she had given birth to a hanyou child—InuYasha—was something that Kagome wished he didn’t understand so well.

She made quick work of getting dressed and straightening up the bathroom. Still lost in her bleak thoughts, she accidentally grabbed InuYasha’s toothpaste and ended up gagging a little at the overly sweet stuff. He’d flat-out refused to try the minty toothpaste that she used. She grinned. After his run-in with her mother’s curry long before, it really hadn’t surprised her that he would be so adamant in not wanting to use the ‘adult’ stuff. He did have stronger senses than she did.

He actually wouldn't touch anything that smelled even remotely like it might be spicy. He'd agreed to try out the bubble gum flavored paste, though, and had used it ever since.

Stepping out of the bathroom, Kagome shivered. The moist warmth of the bathroom wafted out in her wake. She slipped on her shoes and grabbed a sweater and her book bag, pausing only long enough to double check that her cell phone was in there. After glancing in the mirror above the bench next to the door, Kagome stepped outside and headed off to classes.

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InuYasha flopped down in the chair at the table, pinning his brother with a bored stare. Already in a bad mood when the call had come, InuYasha didn't have the patience to deal with this encounter when he had bigger fish to fry, most importantly, he hadn't been able to reach Kagome all afternoon. "This had better be important, Sesshoumaru," he commented.

"I thought you'd be overjoyed to visit me, little brother."

"About as overjoyed as I would be to face down Naraku again. What do you want?"

Sesshoumaru sat down across the table and leaned back, staring at InuYasha in such a way that the hanyou knew that whatever was coming wasn't going to be good. "Have you claimed her?"

"Who?"

"Don't be a baka, InuYasha. Your miko; have you marked her?" InuYasha's flush must have been a good enough answer for Sesshoumaru. The youkai shook his head slowly, and when his eyes met InuYasha's, the latter saw that his brother was amused by it. "Are you waiting for something in particular?"

InuYasha bristled, fighting down the deeper-blossoming redness he felt welling up. "You're such a fucking bastard, Sesshoumaru. Have I told you that recently? Because if I haven't, then consider yourself told. It's none of your business if I have or not."

Sesshoumaru rolled his eyes and waited for InuYasha's tirade to end. "On the contrary, InuYasha, it *is* my business. According to human law, your miko is too young to marry, and according to youkai law, she is sorely unprotected. Unless and until you mark her as yours another youkai could do it, with or without her consent."

"Over my dead body," InuYasha snarled, flashing his fangs. "I'll kill anyone who tries."

"Calm yourself. There have been no threats made against the miko. If there were, I'd tell you. I'm just warning you. There are those out there who would seek to claim her because of her power alone. Surely you know this. A human who can see youkai? She is a threat. What better way to contain a threat than to kill her . . .?"

“. . . Or claim her,” InuYasha said, his voice suddenly soft. He hadn’t been able to reach her on her cell phone. *‘Damn it, Kagome . . . where are you?’*

“Uncle Yasha!”

InuYasha snapped out of his dark thoughts as a blur of black hair launched himself onto his uncle’s lap. “Hey, Toga. Your mom still mad at me?”

Toga shrugged. “Nope. She’s mad at Father now, for letting me play with Tokijin.”

InuYasha gaze swung over to pin Sesshoumaru with an amused look. Sesshoumaru looked away and pursed his lips together. “I was *training* the boy,” he said in self-defense.

InuYasha didn’t comment. “Father told me about your sword? Tetsusaiga? Will you show me the Wind Scar sometime?”

“Sure, squirt. Next time you come over, I’ll show you the power your father couldn’t master.”

Sesshoumaru growled low in response. “Careful, InuYasha. I doubt your miko would appreciate your returning to her in pieces.”

“As if you could,” InuYasha shot back. He set Toga on the floor and got up with a sigh as he made a point to check his watch. “Unless you’ve got anything else to say, I’m leaving.”

“Wait.” Sesshoumaru’s shifted his gaze to his son. “Toga, is that your mother calling?”

Toga frowned. “I don’t hear her.”

“I do.”

Still looking perplexed but unwilling to gainsay his father, Toga walked slowly out of the room. Sesshoumaru closed the door behind his son and turned back to stare at InuYasha. It was another of the looks that InuYasha didn’t like or trust. “Make it fast, Sesshoumaru. I’ve got things to do.”

“Have you found where she will receive your mark?”

Heat shot to his face all over again. InuYasha nodded, his head jerking with the movement. “Not that I really think it’s any of your fucking business, but yeah, I have.”

“Then why haven’t you done it? Surely it may hurt her a bit, but the miko’s always had a fool’s courage . . .” Sesshoumaru’s chin dropped as his gaze narrowed on InuYasha. “It isn’t her, is it? She’s not the reason you’ve not done it . . . you are. Tell me, baka, are you afraid to mark her?”

“Feh!” InuYasha snorted then sighed. He flopped into his chair with disgusted shake of the head. “It’s not her . . . It’s just . . . I *can’t* hurt her.” He made a face. *‘Why did I just admit that?’*

Sesshoumaru shrugged and sank back down in his chair. “There is pain involved, though I daresay it is worse for you than it would be for her. She’d be unconscious for most of the ritual.”

For some reason, that bothered InuYasha even more. He knew roughly what it entailed. His instincts were strong enough in that. Still, to alleviate the miniscule doubt that lingered, InuYasha had to ask. “How do you know when it’s gone far enough?”

Sesshoumaru looked confused. “You listen to her heart. When it starts to weaken, you finish it.”

That’s what he had thought. InuYasha grimaced. That was what he had *feared*. If he wasn’t sure before, he was now. There really wasn’t any way in hell he could do that, not to her . . .

“It isn’t pleasant. I won’t pretend that it is. But it is necessary, make no mistake. If you love her . . . if you want to *keep* her . . . then you must do it.”

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InuYasha dropped his bag on the floor with a frustrated sigh. His nostrils were assailed by the delicious fragrances drifting from the kitchen. His ears twitched. Kagome was humming under her breath. Instant relief washed over him but was rapidly nudged aside by irritation.

“Did your cell phone break?” he demanded, stalking into the large room.

Kagome’s humming stopped. She turned her head enough to eye him before she stirred the food in the wok again. “I had to turn the ringer off in class, and I forgot to turn it back on. I’m sorry . . . What’s wrong?”

“Kagome . . . we’ve got to talk.” He took her hand and led her out of the kitchen into the living room. Dammit was lounging on the sofa, and when Kagome sat down, the dog immediately put her head in Kagome’s lap.

With a deep breath, Kagome started talking first, eyes downcast, as though she thought she had done something worth reprimanding. “I know what you’re going to say, and I’m really sorry . . . I wasn’t trying to drop hints or change your mind . . . I wasn’t thinking.”

InuYasha squatted on the floor by the coffee table and frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about? Hints about what?”

Kagome methodically smoothed Dammit’s fur. “This morning, when I mentioned children . . . that’s not what’s bothering you?”

He shook his head. “Wha—? Er, no. Um . . . there’s something else.”

Her gaze was suspicious, wary, as she stared at him. “What else?”

He flinched inwardly at the thick trepidation in her voice. He deserved that . . . “I talked to Sesshoumaru today. He told me some stuff.” Kagome seemed calm enough. There was a slight tightness around her mouth, a tension that reverberated from her. He could sense her anxiety. ‘*Best to just spit it out,*’ he growled at himself. He cleared his throat. “I should . . . I’m supposed to mark you as mine. It’s a ritual. It serves to keep other youkai away from you, and, in the case of a human—like you—it’ll make you live longer, to be with me.”

She smiled, as though the idea was wonderful. He winced. This wasn’t going exactly how he had thought it would . . . “Why do you sound like this isn’t a good thing? What’s involved?”

For some reason, he couldn’t meet her gaze, as though even talking about this was somehow betraying the vow he’d made to her. “Basically, it’s just an exchange of blood,” he said. “Yours and mine.”

She sat up a little straighter, and when he dared to look at her, she was still smiling. “That doesn’t sound so bad. How do we do this?”

With a grimace, InuYasha sighed and shook his head. “It’s not that simple, Kagome, not by a long shot . . .”

She scooted off the sofa and knelt beside him. “Then tell me, InuYasha. What *exactly* is bothering you about this?”

“There’s a lot of blood involved in it. I’d . . . I’d have to cut you deep, and you’d lose much of yours. When your heart slows then I have to give you my blood.”

Kagome sat back, looking as though she was considering what he’d said. When she spoke, her voice was low, steady. “If it means I can be with you, then I’ll do it.”

He shook his head slowly. “You don’t understand. I *can’t*.”

“But you just said—”

With a heavy sigh, InuYasha shot to his feet and stalked across the room. “If I could do this by bleeding myself dry, I would. But I can’t, and this isn’t me. It’s you. Kagome, I tried to do it the other night. I couldn’t then, either.”

She pushed herself to her feet and slowly came to him. Wrapping her arms around him, holding him close, she sighed softly, laying her cheek against his chest. “We don’t have to do this tonight, do we? I mean, maybe you’ll get used to the idea of what you have to do, right?”

InuYasha stared down at her. Though he couldn’t see her face, he knew she was smiling. She had complete faith that he would be able to do this. He pulled her closer, desire to do it warring with his need to protect her.



## ~~Chapter 36~~

### ~Claimed~

Kagome stared out over the pond, her head leaning to the side as she half-dozed in the bright sunshine. The history textbook that she was supposed to be studying lay forgotten in her lap. With a quick shake, Kagome turned her attention back to the book. She needed to finish her assignment. Trouble was that it was one of the last nice days left of the year, she was sure, and she didn't have the will to remain inside to study for the upcoming test.

It was too easy, too nice, too comfortable to think about InuYasha. *'Better to think about him than to study for a test,'* she thought with a guilty sigh. He encompassed her without smothering who she was, added to her sense of self and still encouraged her to rely on him, completed her soul without demanding that she lose her identity. He was her balance, her center . . . *'And,'* she thought as she caught sight of her history book again, *'my reason for failing history.'* With a sigh, she forced her attention back onto the book once more.

Her attention wandered again. Gaze drawn upward as though by an invisible force, Kagome stared out over the water as she let her head rest against the tree trunk. Dammit lay near the water's edge. The dog lifted her head to glance at Kagome before she returned to her drowsing. A quick trip to the vet had confirmed Kagome's suspicion. The dog was pregnant, due in about a week. Her belly was grossly distended, and Dammit didn't run around the yard with InuYasha in the evenings like she used to. Kagome smiled. *'It's the small price you pay,'* she supposed, *'to have pups . . .'*

Deliberately ignoring the ache that welled up whenever she had such thoughts, Kagome dropped her attention back on the book in her lap. *'Focus, Kagome! This test is important!'*

All too soon, though, her attention waned, her eyes wandered. The warm breeze of autumn rippled over her, and she closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She loved being outside. The scents, the sounds, the magnificent colors of fall . . . they all reminded her of InuYasha . . .

“You call that studying?”

She smiled vaguely but didn't turn her head. His voice, soft yet gruff, a primitive sound that suited him completely, ebbed over her with invisible fingers, playing at the edges of her emotions with a will all their own. “I didn't hear you get home.”

He knelt behind her, resting his hand on her side, over the scar where the Shikon no Tama had been torn from her body. His fingers twitched slightly as they lingered there as his other hand

smoothed her hair. *‘How can one gesture be so soothing and yet altogether unsettling at the same time?’* she wondered, her mind rapidly coming undone as he casually stroked her hair.

His claws barely grazed her neck. She shivered but didn’t jerk away from his touch. “Cold?”

“N-n-no.”

He chuckled. Hot breath, the heady feel of grazing fangs . . . She gasped softly. Along the arch of her neck, he teased her unmercifully. Kagome melted against him, her head falling further to the side as his other arm reached around her, offering her support as he continued to destroy the last semblance of coherent thought she possessed. His growl was a familiar thing. As though he was trying to pacify her, he continued the low resonance as she tried to relax, to savor the feelings erupting inside her. Along with a delicious heat, she felt as though he was somehow enveloping her, drawing her into himself. The thought was inane; it brought a half-smile to her lips.

“What are you . . . doing to . . . me?” she whispered, her voice constricted.

Her answer was a gentle brush of lips over the hollow of her collarbone. She whimpered as his lips returned to the spot, his tongue flicking out, and the gentle draw on her flesh. He pulled her closer, nestled her to him, offered her comfort that warred with the consuming intensity that flowed between them.

The textbook slipped off her lap and lay forgotten as InuYasha turned Kagome. Lying in his arms, cradled against his chest, eyes half closed, she waited.

And then he kissed her.

As though everything had been a dim foreshadowing of the emotion to follow, she gasped softly as his mouth drew on hers. The sound was muffled by his lips, lost in the veil of an autumn afternoon that no one else could share. Time and place fell away, leaving Kagome with nothing but a name to hold to, a knowledge to cling to. *‘InuYasha . . .’*

But the ache that started as nothing more than an afterthought was escalating into something with more of an urgency. It built inside her with every moment, with every kiss, with every touch. Her soft whines went unheeded; her incoherent half words were ignored. He deliberately provoked her. She knew it and yet was powerless to stop it. He kissed her cheek, her jaw, nibbled on her ear, bathed the hollow behind with his tongue. She shivered, her nerves as tight as a wire ready to snap. “Please . . .” she murmured, unsure exactly what she meant but positive that he would understand.

InuYasha let his hand ride over the softness of her sweater. Tracing her contours while he assailed her mind, clouded her thoughts, she arched into his hand only to be frustrated when he pulled back. Light touches, lingering kisses, and the one word that echoed through her head was, *‘please’ . . .*

His hand slipped under the sweater, resting on the scalding flesh of her belly. Her fists tightened on his shirt, wrinkling the fabric with a force that she couldn't control. As if being spurred on by need alone, she kissed him back, telling him what she wanted—*needed*—from him. He growled fiercely as she captured his tongue, drew on it, pulled him in, tried to make him understand what he was doing to her.

She heard the dull sound of ripping material though it made no sense to her. Then suddenly, blessedly, his hand covered her breast, and her head fell back with a moan. She could feel the barely-contained gentleness in his stroke, reveled in the way his fingers shook as he touched her .

..

It wasn't enough. Spurred on by the flames of what he did to her, Kagome fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. His breathing was ragged, and he strained under her fingers. He wanted to help her, she realized through her haze. Yet he let her do it on her own, pacifying himself by kissing her, touching her, kneading her flesh in his palm, rubbing the pad of his thumb over her until she was ready to scream.

His skin was burning to the touch, as though a fire was engulfing him from the inside out. Hesitantly at first, then bolder as he shuddered under her exploration, Kagome touched his chest, fingertips etching the hollows and arcs of flesh, the outlines that she had seen before but never felt, at least, not like this. His body was a paradox, soft skin over muscle, unyielding yet forgiving, too.

Dammit growled, a savage sound that cut through InuYasha's senses with a sharp twist. He pulled his hand out of Kagome's sweater, head shooting up, ears twitching.

"What . . .?" Kagome muttered, controlling her irritation as best as she could. InuYasha gently moved her off his lap and slowly stood.

"Get the Tetsusaiga," he murmured in her ear as she stood.

Kagome frowned. "Tetsusaiga? Why?"

"Now."

Something in his tone, something in the way he stood there, staring into the forest beyond, struck Kagome as odd. She didn't ask any more questions but broke into a dead run toward the house, toward the Tetsusaiga. What was it that he sensed? Why did he want the Tetsusaiga? These questions plagued her. But she stood on tiptoe to yank down the sword before racing back outside.

"Stay there!"

She skidded to a stop at InuYasha's order. He only used that tone with her when he was deadly serious, and she knew it. Dammit stood before her, staring in the same direction as InuYasha with her teeth bared and a vicious growl.

“I know you’re there. You might as well come out,” InuYasha called as he edged sideways, trying to get close enough to reach the sword.

The bushes on the edge of the clearing shook. Kagome gasped as the panther youkai stepped out of the foliage. “We meet again, oh Prince of Dogs. What is your name again? Ah, yes. InuYasha, is it? How befitting.”

Kagome tried to step forward, to close the distance and give InuYasha the Tetsusaiga. Dammit turned slightly and growled a warning at her.

“What do you want, Hyou?” InuYasha demanded.

Hyou chuckled. “I’ve come to claim the miko, of course. Since you’re obviously in no hurry to mark her, then she’s fair game.”

InuYasha snarled. “You’re not going to fucking touch her.”

“Do you care so much, Prince of Dogs? If you do, then you really should have marked her long ago, don’t you think?” Hyou slowly, deliberately, stepped closer to Kagome. Dammit growled again. The panther youkai didn’t even spare her a second glance.

InuYasha didn’t answer. But he did stride forward and snatched Tetsusaiga out of Kagome’s grip. “Stay back.”

She nodded. If she had a bow and arrow, she could probably take Hyou down, herself. She bit her bottom lip as InuYasha stepped away from her, Tetsusaiga transforming in his hands.

He moved so quickly that Kagome gasped. InuYasha lunged at the panther, cleaving an arc with Tetsusaiga. Hyou managed to dodge the blade, and he laughed. “Your clumsy fighting skills are no match for my speed, Prince of Dogs.”

“You’d be surprised at my skills,” InuYasha growled, swinging again but missing.

“Don’t make me laugh, hanyou. You really aren’t worth the effort.” In a blur of movement, Hyou raced forward and slammed his fist into InuYasha’s jaw. InuYasha staggered back. Hyou took advantage of the moment to kick the Tetsusaiga out of InuYasha’s grip. The sword landed blade down in the earth and transformed back. InuYasha shook his head and lunged for the sword. His hand stilled before he could reach for it, though, when Dammit’s yelp echoed in the clearing followed by Kagome’s gasp.

Kagome wasn’t sure how it happened. The only youkai she’d ever seen move that fast before was Kouga, and that was only because he had jewel shards embedded in his legs. But it registered in her mind as Dammit’s body skidded across the ground that Hyou had come close enough to grab her just as she felt the needle-sharp claws at her throat. She didn’t have the

chance to struggle. When InuYasha's gaze met hers, she saw the momentary flash of red. *'Get the Tetsusaiga, InuYasha!'*

"Get your fucking hands off her," he growled, jerking the sword out of the ground and stalking forward.

"Come any closer and I'll rip open her throat."

Kagome cried out as Hyou's claws pierced her flesh enough to draw blood. InuYasha smelled it immediately, and Kagome was shocked to see his eyes flash red again despite Tetsusaiga, held tightly in his grip. *'No . . . !'*

"Let her go. Deal with me," InuYasha said though he came no closer.

Hyou's free hand moved up and down, not touching Kagome's body, as though searching. He hesitated over her side then laughed. "I see . . . I've found the place. How odd that she should be marked on her side? No matter . . . Care to watch, Prince of Dogs? Once I mark her, she will belong to me, and you'll never have her."

InuYasha looked as though he wanted to attack. The claws already dug into Kagome's neck tightened. She whimpered again as InuYasha flinched. His glower darkened even more as he stared above her head at Hyou's smug face.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Hyou's hand draw back, meaning to strike, as InuYasha's words came back to her, *'There's a lot of blood involved in it. I'd have to cut you deep, and you'd lose much of yours. When your heart slows then I have to give you my blood.'* Hyou meant to do it.

His hand sliced through the air so quickly that Kagome could hear the whistle of the manufactured wind. She didn't think as she reacted, shoving against the youkai as she held out her hands to warn him away. "*No!*" she shrieked as a blinding flash of pinkish-white light filled the clearing, and she crumpled to the ground.

InuYasha raised his arm to shield his eyes from the burst of Kagome's miko energy. When he lowered it, the first thing he saw as the light faded was Kagome, unconscious on the ground. Hyou was sprawled not far from her, and though InuYasha's first instinct was to check her injuries, he had to deal with the youkai first.

He compromised, sticking Tetsusaiga into the ground before lifting Kagome and carrying her out of the way. He snatched the sword, transforming it, and smacked the flat of the blade against the panther youkai's cheek to rouse him. Hyou awoke with a start and started to sit up. InuYasha lifted the sword, pointing the blade at Hyou's throat. "You'll kill me, then?"

"Keh! Like that was ever even in question." InuYasha taunted, jabbing Tetsusaiga's razor sharp point into the youkai's neck enough to draw blood. "Now get up and fight."



## ~~Chapter 37~~

### ~Kagome's Request~

He cracked his knuckles, ready to do what sickened him, turned his stomach, made him want to die somewhere deep in his soul. Necessary or not, the idea of marrying her, of cutting into her, of being the reason that she bled . . . He couldn't do it. *'I . . . I can't . . . Fucking hell, I can't . . . !'*

A growl of frustration turned into a whine of agony as InuYasha shook his head in defeat. He really couldn't do it. With a sigh that was a mix of self-disgust and worry, he carefully lifted her and carried her into the house.

He lay her down on the bed, her tiny form seeming lost in the huge thing. He stared at her for long moments, wondering, searching for answers in her serene face. Damn it, he *had* to mark her; he knew he did. But knowing something and being able to do it were two different things entirely, and InuYasha sighed. He sat on the edge of the bed, idly fingering the prayer bead necklace. It was so much more than simply his feelings for her that stopped him from putting his mark on her, he realized. *'I promised I'd protect her from harm—any harm. To hurt her, even for this . . .'*

Everything he'd ever believed, everything he'd ever fought for . . . all the things he did for her, they culminated in this. What he had to do . . . and what he couldn't do. *'There's got to be another way . . . something that I've overlooked . . . I can't hurt her . . . she is my heart . . .'*

No answers came to him, no sounds in the quiet house. As though his questions went unheeded, InuYasha sighed in defeat. He'd lay himself open on Tetsusaiga for her, he'd fight off a thousand youkai if she asked him, he'd wander the earth for five hundred years if he had to, he'd pluck the moon from the sky for her, but this . . . this he could not do.

The doorbell jarred him out of his reverie, and InuYasha kissed Kagome's cheek before he got up. She half-smiled. So did he.

He swung the door open and blinked in surprise to see Rin and one of her daughters—the oldest one, Nori—standing there. InuYasha stepped back, letting her in, and Rin smiled brightly. "Hi, InuYasha. Kagura asked me to swing by and drop off these since I had a few other errands to run." She handed him a manila envelope. InuYasha scowled at it. "Where's Kagome?"

Peeking inside the envelope but finding nothing but boring insurance forms to fill out, InuYasha dropped the envelope onto the hall table and closed the front door. "Sleeping," he replied, heading for the back door. In his hurry to get Kagome taken care of, he'd forgotten the Tetsusaiga. Nori ran outside with him. Rin followed.

“What happened out here?” Rin asked, surveying the gouges in the earth with unmasked surprise.

InuYasha retrieved Kagome’s forgotten textbook and stalked over to the rusty Tetsusaiga. “Hyou showed up.”

Nori knelt down next to Dammit. Dammit wagged her tail but still didn’t get up.

“I see,” Rin replied, careful of what she said within earshot of the little girl. “I trust everything was taken care of then?”

InuYasha nodded and brushed past Rin to put things away. “Nori, be a good girl and stay there with the dog, okay? I need to talk to InuYasha.”

“Okay!”

Rin carefully closed the door behind herself, and InuYasha could feel her eyes on him. “I’m a good listener,” Rin finally remarked.

“Keh! I’m fine,” InuYasha growled as he wiped off Tetsusaiga’s blade before hanging it back over the mantle.

Rin’s chuckle was soft, husky, reassuring. “You are so much like Father it’s uncanny.”

He shot her a dark look for that. “I’m nothing like that bastard.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“You want something to drink?” InuYasha asked as he headed for the kitchen.

“Sure.”

He grabbed a couple of bottles of water and returned. Rin was staring out the window at her daughter. InuYasha handed Rin a bottle and watched Nori, as well. With Shippou’s bright copper locks and Rin’s delicate features, the child was adorable. InuYasha grinned at the little fox ears that stuck out of the girl’s hair.

For just a moment, he imagined what it would be like, to watch his own pups running through the yard, playing, happy, laughing. Kagome hid it well—her sadness—for his benefit, he was sure. Yet there were moments when he could almost see the melancholy the idea of never having children caused in her.

Just as suddenly, though, flashes of his childhood filtered through his mind, the sense of never belonging, of always being an outcast. Humans might not see hanyous or youkai for what they

were now. But the youkai would know, and the youkai, he knew from experience, tended to be far crueler to those of mixed heritage than humans ever could be.

“Papa says you’ve yet to mark Kagome.”

InuYasha flinched, brought rudely out of his glum thoughts by an even more troublesome one. He sighed. Then he stared at Rin. Maybe, if anyone could alleviate his fears, it would be her . . . “Did it hurt? When Shippou marked you?”

Rin made a face and grimaced. “Well . . . that’s the thing. Shippou never did.”

InuYasha frowned. “What do you mean, he never did? You’d be dead by now if he didn’t.”

“He never had to.” She laughed softly at the confused look on InuYasha’s face. “I lived with Father so long that youkai knew I was in his protection, as a daughter, you see. When Shippou came around, it was just never necessary.”

“But you’re as old as he is. How can you still be alive?”

“Papa. Shippou and I haven’t been married very long, you know. Six years, to be exact.”

InuYasha shook his head. “I’m missing something.”

“Father gave me his Mokokoko-sama. That’s why I’ve stayed alive.”

InuYasha’s eyes narrowed just before his eyebrows shot up. Sure, he’d realized that inu-youkai possessed a certain quality, and that the Mokokoko-sama of the more powerful of their line did hold special powers in and of themselves. But for Sesshoumaru to have given his to Rin? InuYasha hadn’t realized that Sesshoumaru had ever cared so deeply for anyone else before. The Sesshoumaru he knew from five hundred years ago wouldn’t have cared at all . . . or maybe he would have. InuYasha snorted out an incredulous laugh.

“You don’t want to hurt her, do you?” Rin asked quietly, cutting to the crux of InuYasha’s troublesome thoughts.

“It’s more than that,” he admitted slowly. “Even to protect her . . . I can’t.”

Rin sighed. “Maybe there’s another way. Don’t give up.”

InuYasha stared hard at his claws. He’d used those claws hundreds—thousands—of times to defend Kagome. A vivid image of marking her, of what it would mean, of using the same claws to cut her wide open, to leave her bleeding . . . He shuddered against the mental image of it as his stomach lurched in protest. The spot where she would receive his mark was exactly where the Shikon no Tama had come from. What did it all mean?

Rin giggled as Nori and Dammit frolicked around, hopping over the remnants of the Wind Scar. InuYasha smiled despite his bleak thoughts as he watched the child, too. “When are you and Kagome going to start a family of your own?” Rin asked, having noticed the brightening in his expression as he watched Nori.

His smile disappeared as an immediate and intense flush broke over his features. “We’re . . . uh . . . not.”

Rin looked surprised. She nodded slowly and sighed. “Well, you can’t tell me that Kagome doesn’t want one. So I’ll guess that you don’t.”

InuYasha scowled. “You make it sound worse than it is,” he grumbled.

“Does Kagome know you feel this way?”

He wished the subject would drop. Judging by the way Rin was staring at him, however, he had a feeling that it wasn’t to be. “Yeah, she does.”

“Can I ask why?”

The genuine concern in her voice kept him from snapping at her. “How can I have pups when I know how hanyous are treated? It’s not that I don’t want a family, but—”

“InuYasha, the world has changed since you were a child. Hanyous aren’t looked down on the way they were back then. Do you think I would have done that to my own kids?”

His look dared Rin to lie. She smiled compassionately. He wanted to believe her. He really did. He just couldn’t.

Rin sighed and patted InuYasha’s arm as she glanced back at the mantle clock. “Listen, I’ve got to go. Shippou’s taking me to the opera tonight. But think about what I said? And if you need to talk . . . ?”

He nodded. Rin leaned forward and kissed his cheek before slipping out the back door to round up her daughter. Nori waved happily at him. He waved back.

Rin’s advice left him even more confused than he had been before. Shaking his head slowly, he pushed away from the door and headed off to check on Kagome again.

She was sitting up on the bed, with her hands over her face when he came in. “Kagome? Are you okay?”

Her hands fell away, and he saw, to his relief, that she looked calm, even rested, despite the marked bruising around the neck wounds. But she smiled at him and patted the bed beside her. “I thought I heard a voice.”



## ~~Chapter 38~~

### ~InuYasha's Heart~

InuYasha knelt on the ground as Kagome slid off his back to stand beside him. She seemed perfectly calm and yet anticipation welled up in her, as though there was something wonderful waiting for her just inside the cave. The cave seemed oddly unaffected, even by the passage of five hundred years. It appeared to Kagome the same as it was the last time she had been here. She'd been so young then.

“Do you want to go in alone?” he asked quietly.

Kagome shook her head. “She wants to talk to you, I think . . . I mean, I *feel* it.”

He took her hand, offering her a reassuring squeeze when he felt her pulse fluttering in an erratic pattern. “We don't have to do this.”

“I want to. I'm just anxious.”

She stepped toward the cave, dragging InuYasha along. He seemed almost reticent. She shot him a quick grin.

The barrier around the cave's entrance tingled as Kagome stepped through. InuYasha followed. “I wonder if anyone has been in here since the last time we were,” Kagome remarked, her voice hushed, low.

“Probably not.” He stopped short, staring at the same structure they'd first seen so long ago.

Kagome let go of InuYasha's hand and slowly walked toward the statue. She raised her hand to touch the hole in Midoriko's chest—the spot where the Shikon no Tama had been forced out. Her arm glowed with a soft light as she reached forward, touching the armor, touching the priestess.

Kagome's aura glowed brighter, casting the melancholy cave in warm light. A strange current rippled through Kagome and into the statue, and as she stared, the casing that covered the powerful miko fell away. Eyes closed with a faint smile, Midoriko's skin glowed with the power of Kagome's energy, and InuYasha watched in amazement as Midoriko very slowly opened her eyes.

“Kagome, you've regained your memories, I see.”

Kagome stepped back and bowed. "I have. I appreciate what you did, but . . . why is it that I can remember both times? I wasn't in both places at the same time. That's not possible."

"You existed in both times, Kagome, because you needed to do this task, and because your life would have been altered too significantly to be repaired otherwise. You were here, in your place and in your time, doing what you needed to do. Your heart, however, your conscious mind . . . Those were with the ones you met in the past," Midoriko explained, resting her hand against Kagome's cheek.

"So my body was here and my mind was in the past . . . ? It was all a dream? Miroku? Sango? All of it?"

Midoriko chuckled. "Not a dream, Kagome, never a dream. Were it merely a dream, would you have come to love your hanyou so much?"

Kagome's confusion was a palpable thing. "Then what was it?"

"I think in your world, it is called a 'parallel universe'. Both sets of memories are correct. Both sets of memories are yours. Both sets of circumstances happened to you and because of you. They simply existed at the same time on different planes."

"I think I understand," Kagome said slowly. "InuYasha . . ."

"Ah, your guardian." Midoriko's eyes brightened as they shifted to look over Kagome's shoulder at InuYasha. "You found a way to her, I see. I wondered . . ."

"Did you know all along, that I'd come for her?" InuYasha demanded. "And if you did, why did you take away Kagome's memories?"

Midoriko's slight smile widened. "I didn't know, for you were not there. I cannot see into a heart that isn't shown to me. As for Kagome's memories, she needed this, so that she realized what she needed to know." Midoriko's hand dropped from Kagome's cheek as the miko walked slowly toward InuYasha. "Show me what is in your heart, InuYasha."

Gaze narrowing, he stepped back, hesitating. "Why?"

"Always the warrior, aren't you?" Midoriko chuckled. "Worry not, hanyou. I owe you a gift, for protecting Kagome, and for finding a way back to her."

She lifted her hand, placing it on InuYasha's cheek, as she had done to Kagome. The miko closed her eyes, a vague frown marring her brow. Then she smiled again. Her hand dropped from him, and when she opened her eyes again, they were full of unshed tears. "It pains you to hurt her, does it not? And yet it is necessary for you to do this, for you to mark her as your intended?"

InuYasha couldn't look at Midoriko. A sudden flash of what should be stuck in his mind, an all-too-real image of him, standing over Kagome as her blood spilled from her. Eyes dull and

condemning, staring at him with bitter reproach in her gaze. *'You promised you'd protect me, InuYasha . . . What have you done to me?'*

He flinched at the vision as the coppery scent of Kagome's blood filled his nose, turned his stomach, sickened him. For a moment he saw her blood on his claws. He closed his eyes against the illusion. When he opened them again, his hands were clean.

Midoriko cupped his chin in her hand and forced him to look at her. "Pride and honor are wonderful traits InuYasha. These you possess in abundance, but because of these things, you cannot do what, in your heart, is unthinkable, and as much as you would have it otherwise, it is simply not within you to bring harm to Kagome."

One curt nod. InuYasha tried not to think, not to see. Kagome's eyes burned into his mind, the ache building inside his head as her skin faded to an ashen hue, as her flesh grew cold to his touch. He shook himself, as though trying to push away the distorted visage of the woman he loved, dying because of him.

But Midoriko continued, her voice soft, gentle, soothing away the nightmare visions with her words. "Yet you love her. You love her more than you love yourself. It is that love that makes you wish to carry out the ritual, and it is the same emotion that stills your hand."

"I . . . yeah."

Midoriko's smile was bright, radiant. She let go of InuYasha and took his hand, leading him forward to stand beside Kagome.

"InuYasha, put your hand where Kagome should receive your mark."

He hesitated only a moment before lifting his hand to cover the vague scar. Midoriko's hand covered his. InuYasha stared into Kagome's eyes as a faint warmth, a dazzling energy rippled through his hand into her flesh underneath. A sudden breeze whipped through the cave. Kagome felt a tickling sensation, something gentle and soft. It went more than skin deep. As though visiting the feeling down to her very bones, she could feel a sudden heat burst within her, as bright as sunshine, as brilliant as InuYasha's timid smile. The wind whipped her hair into her face but she didn't blink. InuYasha's gaze was intense, golden flecks of color fading and rising, pulsing with the strength of the blood that coursed through her veins.

Gradually, though, like a music box winding down from its song, the wind diminished. As it died, Midoriko let her hand fall away. "It is done."

InuYasha blinked in surprise and glanced at Midoriko before his eyes dropped to Kagome again. She stared at him a moment before slowly lifting the hem of her blouse. No larger than the width of two of his fingers, InuYasha touched the silvery slash on her flesh, the definite mark. He blinked quickly as he stared at it, his claws tracing over the mark over and over, as though he didn't quite believe it had happened, that he didn't have to worry about it any longer.

Kagome was his.

A strange mix of emotions shot to the fore. Kagome smiled but blinked as tears filled her eyes. She stared at InuYasha and realized he was having much the same problem. She threw her head back and laughed.

Midoriko cleared her throat softly, drawing their attention. "Come with me, InuYasha. I'd like to speak with you while I still have time."

-=-=-=-=-=-

InuYasha followed Midoriko further away from Kagome, almost afraid to hear what the miko wanted to say.

"I saw another conflict in your heart, InuYasha. Unfortunately, the other is one that isn't so easily handled. Do not remain obstinate for the sake of the act. The one you chose desires to bear your children."

His gaze dropped as heat filtered into his cheeks. "I know," he admitted. "I just want to know that they won't be treated the way I was, and . . ."

"You don't have to change your mind this second, InuYasha. You are both still very young. For Kagome's sake, though, perhaps you could give it a bit more thought?"

InuYasha grimaced. Truth was, he already was giving it more thought. Since his talk with Rin, he'd been too preoccupied by the daunting task of marking Kagome that he'd not been able to give Rin's words proper credence. But now . . . he glanced over at Kagome. She sat on a small boulder with her shirt pulled up on the side, staring at the mark on her flesh. Even from here, InuYasha could see it plainly. He smiled. "I'll think about it," he remarked, idly watching as Kagome straightened her blouse then lifted the hem again, as though the mark somehow made her happy, too.

"Well done, InuYasha. You have protected Kagome far better than I could have hoped for."

Midoriko turned and walked back to Kagome. He stayed where he was. The women talked for a few minutes. Kagome reached out and hugged Midoriko. Then she stepped back as Midoriko's spirit faded away. When it did, it seemed as though the entire cave diminished. The statue that had stood for so long crumbled into a pile of ash and dirt, and the gentle blue light that filtered from that statue faded out completely.

He stepped over to Kagome and took her hand. "Come on, Kagome. I think it's time to go."

She spared another long moment, staring at the ruin where the mighty priestess used to stand. She squeezed InuYasha's hand and let him lead her out of the cave. The barrier that used to block the entrance was gone.

Blinking quickly in the bright sunlight, InuYasha couldn't help but remember Midoriko's words. He'd promised Midoriko he'd give the idea of having a family more thought, at least for Kagome's sake. He made a face. *'If anyone ever dared to tease my pups though,'* he thought with a fierce growl, *'I'd make them regret ever being born.'*

Kagome's small hand wrapped around the prayer beads. InuYasha stared down at her hand as a pink light engulfed both her hand as well as the beads. "What are you doing?" he asked, his voice gentle.

The light faded, and Kagome stepped back, a bright grin surfacing on her face, lending more sparkle to her expression. "Midoriko said that I could remove the curse on the beads," she admitted. "Not that I was tempted to use it anymore, because I wasn't."

Cautiously, he lifted the beads. He got them past his eyes before he dropped them again. The incantation really was gone, but the beads were staying put. "Maybe," he said slowly, careful to keep his expression blank as he stepped toward Kagome, "I *liked* being at your mercy. Did you ever think about that?"

"You didn't," she replied, backing up a step. "Anyway, I didn't think you'd mind so much anymore."

He reached out and caught her around the waist and pulling her close. "I'm keeping them."

"I thought you'd say that. But you know, with Dammit about to have her puppies—" Her eyes widened in alarm as she said that. "InuYasha, let's hurry."

"She's not supposed to have them till next week," he pointed out.

Kagome relented when he kissed her. She pulled back though and shook her head. "I have a feeling, though . . . We need to get home."

InuYasha sighed but scooped her up and settled her against his back. "You ruin the best ideas sometimes, Kagome."

She giggled. Her breath brushed his neck, and he shuddered. Tightening his grip on her legs, he vaulted off the ground. *'Leave it to Dammit to ruin a perfectly good opportunity to kiss Kagome.'*

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## ~~Chapter 39~~

### ~Miracles~

“Why the hell is it taking so fucking long?”

Kagome shot him a look over her shoulder. Dammit whined again. InuYasha dug his claws into the sofa. He could sense the dog’s pain. It was enough to drive him crazy. “Calm down, InuYasha. It always takes time to have babies. I suppose having puppies isn’t that much different.”

“Keh!” He shot off of the sofa again and paced the living room floor.

Kagome sighed. “You’re making her more nervous, you know.”

“I wouldn’t be making her nervous if she’d just hurry it along,” he shot back.

Kagome sat back against the window and stabbed InuYasha with an incredulous look. “I can’t believe you just said that,” she remarked in a dry tone.

InuYasha sank down beside Kagome with a mulish frown. They’d reached home from Midoriko’s cave in record time. InuYasha had barely gotten the front door unlocked when Kagome had ducked under his arm and run straight into the house to check on Dammit, who was already in the throes of labor.

That had been hours ago. The sun sank below the horizon, leaving the outer world dark and secretive. InuYasha had built a fire while Kagome gathered some older towels and a blanket for Dammit.

And then the waiting had begun.

Having never seen the birth of anything before, InuYasha had been fascinated . . . at first. His interest had waned considerably with the first of Dammit’s ear-splitting howls awhile ago.

“Why don’t you distract me?” he asked, leaning forward to kiss Kagome. Her eyes drifted closed, her lashes fanning over her cheeks in a way that he found completely endearing. Her tongue flicked out, moistening her lips. Nearly touching, he could feel her breath on his skin . . . Then the dog howled again. Moment lost, Kagome turned away to comfort Dammit.

He heaved a sigh. He'd spent weeks worrying—*agonizing*—over his inability to mark Kagome as his, and now that she was, she cast him aside for a dog. *'The world,'* he thought with an air of disgust, *'is an unfair place.'*

Still, Dammit's piteous yowls were enough to send InuYasha into a near-panic. He tried to placate the animal, rubbing her sides with his claws. Dammit whimpered. She sensed his upset, and that magnified hers. It was a sadistic cycle.

And what came next was enough to make InuYasha's eyes go wide and his stomach lurch unpleasantly. Positioned as he was away from Dammit's head gave him access to a view he thought that he'd have been better off not seeing. *"What the fuck!?"* he hollered, skittering backward across the floor as a squirming white—*something*—was forced out of the dog. Dammit howled again. InuYasha tried to shift his eyes away. He couldn't. It was like a train wreck. He *knew* he shouldn't watch. But he just couldn't *not* watch, either.

Kagome calmly petted Dammit's head, scratching behind her ears, as the dog sat up enough to clean the first born. The pup whined softly. InuYasha's ears perked up. *'Not an unpleasant sound,'* he allowed somewhat grudgingly, and he was oddly curious about the infant dog.

Kagome caught his anxious look as he sat up straighter, as though he wanted to look at the pup but was afraid to come near. She grinned. "Come see, InuYasha. This one's a girl, just like her mama."

As curious as he was to see this pup, InuYasha shook his head quickly, eyes flaring in disbelief, and he scooted away a little more. "You're braver than that," she remarked with a gentle smile. He didn't take the bait.

InuYasha shook his head quickly as Dammit yelped again. Kagome happily squealed as Dammit managed to deliver another puppy. This one, from what he could see, was white with light brown spots.

Two hours and three puppies later, InuYasha had abandoned the house in favor of the cool night outside. He sat on the railing with a frustrated scowl on his face. Dammit had been quieter for the last fifteen minutes or so. But when he thought she'd settle down before, she would howl again.

An image of Kagome in pain filtered through his mind, of her delivering their own pup. He flinched. If he reacted that badly to the idea of Dammit being in pain, he didn't even want to imagine what it would be like if it were Kagome, instead.

The door opened. InuYasha didn't glance over. Kagome folded her hands together and draped them over his shoulder, resting her chin on her hands. "I think she's done."

"What's the damage?" he asked with a wry grin.

"Five," she said then giggled. "Two girls and three boys, from what I can tell. Mother and babies seem to be doing just fine. You want to see them?"

He shook his head quickly. “Keh! I *heard* Dammit having them. Isn’t that *enough*?”

She shivered slightly in the brisk night air. InuYasha slipped his arm around her shoulders. “You ought to go back in,” he said, rubbing her arm up and down to warm her chilled skin. “You’re cold.”

“I’m fine,” she contradicted though she snuggled closer to him anyway. “Are you cold?”

“Keh. I don’t get cold.”

She pushed his hair out of his eyes and turned his face to look at her. “What’s bothering you? And don’t tell me nothing, because I won’t believe you anyway.”

He stared at her for long moments before he finally said, “It hurts.”

Kagome frowned. “What does?” Her eyes suddenly widened in shock, and she leaned away to work at the buttons of his shirt. “Did Hyou injure you? Why didn’t you tell me? Let me see it!”

He caught her hands as she tried to tug on his shirt. “No, Kagome . . .” With a heavy sigh, he made a disgusted face. “*That*,” he clarified, his skin heating as he waved his free hand toward the house.

He heard her hissed breath, the cautious look in her expression. She looked almost amused, a little nervous, and wholly endearing. “Having babies, you mean?” He jerked his head once. She took it as a yes. “Sure, but,” her gaze dropped to the ground. He couldn’t see her face in the darkness. He had a feeling she was blushing, “sometimes women do things even though it may hurt . . . because the rewards are worth the pain.”

“That’s stupid,” InuYasha said with a snort. “You women *like* pain?”

“I didn’t say that,” she explained softly. “It’s just that sometimes there are things that are worth more *because* they hurt you a little.”

And he understood. That’s why she had been so sure that he would have been able to perform the marking ritual on her. Because, in her opinion, the reward of being with him would have been worth any pain she would have had to endure. He sighed. Now if he could be strong, like her . . . ‘*Human children would fit in,*’ he mused slowly. ‘*They wouldn’t be teased so much . . .*’

“Come see the pups,” Kagome coaxed, tugging on InuYasha’s hands. He let her drag him to his feet and followed slowly into the house.

Kagome knelt down beside the nest she’d fashioned out of the old blanket and patted the floor beside her. “They’re so little!” He hunkered down and sniffed at the pups. Kagome picked up one of them and held it out for InuYasha’s inspection. He leaned away. “Come on, InuYasha! They won’t bite!”

He shot her a nervous glance. She giggled. Slowly, he reached out with his index finger and stroked the puppy's head. It squealed in his face. He jerked his hand back and scooted away from them. Kagome's giggle escalated.

"Keh!" he snorted, shooting off the floor and stomping toward the kitchen.

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"Why aren't their eyes open?"

"They'll open soon," Kagome explained. "They were just born last night."

"They don't do much yet."

Kagome giggled. "I'll bet you didn't either, when you were a day old."

Toga frowned in consternation. "When will Uncle Yasha be home?"

She glanced at her watch. "Any time. Aren't you having fun with me?"

Toga made a face. "Well, I suppose, even though you're a *girl*."

Wisely hiding her amusement at Toga's disgruntled answer, Kagome changed the subject to one that she hoped would make the boy smile. "Think InuYasha will be glad to see you?"

Toga nodded happily.

Aiko walked over and flopped down in Kagome's lap. "Story?"

Kagome smiled and took the book from the girl. "You want to listen, Toga?"

Toga snorted, "Keh!"

Kagome did a double-take. With a hidden smile, she opened the book and started reading to Aiko. Toga listened for a few minutes before he skittered over to lean on Kagome's leg. Aiko pushed at her sibling. Toga pushed back. Kagome solved the problem by shifting so that both children could sit on her lap.

She was so engrossed in reading the story that she didn't hear the front door open, didn't see InuYasha leaning casually against the wall, watching her, smiling as he leaned his head to the side. She finished reading the book and snapped it closed. Toga kept chattering to Kagome about the story. Aiko spotted InuYasha and hopped up. "Up! Up!" she hollered.

Kagome glanced up. "I didn't know you were home," she said, moving Toga off her lap so she could rise. Toga ran over to InuYasha, hopping around in his excitement.

InuYasha swung the little girl up in his arms. Her silvery hair flew and bounced, and she shrieked in laughter. "You were a little busy when I came in."

Kagome grinned as InuYasha flattened his ears against the child's delighted sounds. "Kagura called this morning. Their nanny's father died, so I told her I'd watch the children till the nanny comes back."

"Uncle Yasha! Show me Tetsusaiga! You promised, and youkai keep their promises, that's what father says." Toga frowned, as if something had just occurred to him. "You're only half-youkai . . . But you're my uncle, so you *still* have to keep your word!"

InuYasha set Aiko back on her feet. "Let me change first," he agreed.

Kagome followed him as he headed toward the bedroom. "Do you think that's such a good idea? I don't think Kagura would like you showing Toga the sword."

InuYasha dropped the dress shirt on the bed and swiped up a tee shirt instead. Kagome stared at his chest before he tugged the shirt down in place. "It's not polite to stare," he teased. Her cheeks heated. "I'm not going to let him mess with it. Full youkai can't touch it, remember? But I think it'd be okay to show him."

Kagome didn't look like she agreed. Still she didn't comment as he finished changing.

He kissed her quickly before dragging her out of the bedroom by her hand.

She started straightening up the room while the children crowded around InuYasha. He sat them both on the sofa. "Before I get it down, Toga, you have to promise me you won't touch it at all. There's a barrier on it. Full youkai, like you, can't touch it. Promise?"

Toga made a face but nodded. "All right."

After staring at the boy another moment, InuYasha reached up and unhooked Tetsusaiga. "Put on your jacket, Toga," InuYasha instructed. Toga hopped up and ran off to find his jacket. Aiko pouted. "Father says girls don't fight."

"Your mom did, and Kagome is an archer."

Aiko's eyes grew round in wonder. "Really?"

She hopped down and ran off to find Kagome, who had ducked into the laundry room.

He stared after the girl and chuckled then led Toga outside.



## ~~Chapter 40~~

### ~Birthday~

The full moon was coming.

Heaving a sigh, InuYasha shook his head slowly. The movement drew the attention of the puppies. All five of them leapt, trying to grab the silvery strands. He winced as one of them managed to capture some hair and tugged. *'Four-week-old puppies,'* he thought with a snort, *'are worse than children could ever be.'*

That thought led him back to the beginning, and he sighed again. He had really, really grown to despise the full moon nights almost as much as the new moon ones, though for completely different reasons. *'Maybe I should tell Kagome to stay at the shrine tonight.'* Even as the idea surfaced, he pushed it aside. Kagome didn't belong anywhere but here with him, and the fact that she'd insisted on going home to the shrine today, of all days, was enough to make him bear his fangs in a fierce grimace. She was hiding something from him. He knew it. He could sense it in her silence, the same way he could feel her upset whenever children or family was mentioned. Yet every time he tried to talk to her about that, she cut him off with an overly-bright smile or a kiss meant to preoccupy.

Truth was, more and more often lately, InuYasha could see himself with a family, with her. Human children were a possibility. They wouldn't be treated unfairly, and that was the main fear that he had, to begin with. Still, telling Kagome what he thought . . . that was harder. He knew she wanted children. Why did he feel as though she wouldn't be as pleased with the idea of having a human family?

*'Because she loves you, baka, and you're hanyou. Because it has never been about you being a hanyou. It's only ever been about her accepting you and loving you, and you know it.'*

InuYasha growled in frustration. *'Why does it all have to be so fucking difficult?'*

The puppies caught the sound as well as the blatant show of fangs and skittered away from him, peeking at him from behind their mother, who only cast InuYasha a momentary glance before she dropped her head into her paws again and stared out the windows.

*'Trouble is,'* InuYasha admitted to himself, *'I want her, so badly I can taste it. As if it isn't bad enough that I can't get her out of my mind anyway, on the nights of the full moon . . .'* He trailed off with a dejected sigh and raked his claws across the hardwood floor. It was hard enough, to admit that he wanted her so desperately. Swims in the cold pond weren't working so well anymore. Trying to think of something else while Kagome wrapped herself around him

definitely never worked. But something about the full moon made the desire almost overwhelming. As though the part of him that was youkai was fully awakened on those nights, everything about Kagome seemed to beckon him. Too often he could hear the blood pumping through her veins, could smell the underlying scent of her. Her innocent touch was enough to send his overwrought emotions soaring, and a look from her was all that was needed to leave his mind reeling. The worst part of it was that Kagome didn't seem to have a clue that she had that sort of affect on him, at all. He shuddered. What if she figured it out? Would she taunt him even more? *'She is your marked, as good as your mate,'* he reasoned with himself. *'What's to stop you, anyway? She wants you, too, or haven't you noticed?'*

Yet another sigh issued from him. He'd been doing that a lot of late. It irritated him, that he'd suddenly found himself making such a sound. It smacked of human frailty, of weakness. He smiled but it was more of a grimace. Kagome didn't weaken him, not at all. But she did have the ability to bring him to his knees without even realizing that she could. So why didn't her invisible power bother him? *'Because you want to be under her power, baka. You know you do. You want her with you forever. You've admitted as much to her. Now why don't you admit to the other thing, the thing you refuse to acknowledge, even to yourself?'*

InuYasha deliberately ignored those last thoughts, flipping his hair in a gesture deliberately designed to provoke a few young puppies. It worked like a charm. InuYasha chuckled as five yapping pups lunged at him.

*'Damn the full moon,'* he thought with a disgusted snort. One of the two nights a month that he dared not touch her. One of the two nights every month that he dreaded because the aching desire to possess her that always surrounded him was magnified. One of the two nights of the month when a child would come after.

Brought out of his musings when one of the pups bit his finger hard, InuYasha grabbed the fuzzy creature and looked him in the eye, message clear: The pup had overstepped his bounds. The puppy's eyes skittered to the side. Satisfied that he'd corrected the puppy, InuYasha let the animal down to play.

He smelled her when she opened the door. The fresh air of the early winter blew her scent to him. Closing his eyes, stifling a groan, InuYasha fought back the sudden compulsion to chase her down. He schooled his features, willing his expression to blank, he waited for her to approach.

Kagome hugged him from behind and giggled. "Happy birthday, InuYasha."

InuYasha blinked and turned to stare at Kagome. "What?"

She made a face. "Happy birthday!" she repeated, letting go and retrieving the suspect white box that she'd set aside so that she could hug him.

After the momentary confusion wore off, InuYasha leaned back on his hands and lifted his eyebrows as he stared at Kagome, a mischievous smile playing with his lips. "Do I get a gift?"

“Not yet,” she said, her tone way too innocent. “Maybe later.”

Leaning forward, hands and feet flat on the floor, InuYasha shot her a long-suffering look. She didn't take the bait. Instead, she balanced the white box on her hip and reached over to rub his ear before she turned and headed off toward the kitchen.

“Yeah, she's not getting away that easily,” he muttered as he shot up to chase her. “What are you doing?” he demanded. Kagome closed the refrigerator and leaned against it, that enigmatic smile still gracing her lips.

“Be patient,” she chided.

“Distract me.”

Her cheeks pinked. He knew they would. Still, she stepped closer to him, put her hands on his shoulders, rose up on her toes, and kissed him quickly, much too quickly for him, anyway. She smiled at his irritated expression. “Come on, InuYasha. You act like you haven't seen me in days.”

He didn't answer. Slowly, deliberately, he caught her around the waist and lifted her up before turning and sitting her on the counter. His hands stayed on her waist. “What was so urgent that you had to do today?”

Kagome scooted forward and leaned over to stare down at the floor before shifting her eyes to meet his. “Just some things. Will you put me down now?”

“Keh.” Hands sliding off her waist, trailing down her hips, down the sides of her legs to her knees, InuYasha caught her legs and dragged her forward as he drew them apart, bringing her flush up against him. She gasped, instant color filtering into her cheeks at the contact. He smiled. “Do you *really* want down?”

Her blush deepened. She started to shake her head `no' then realized what she was doing. “Yes,” she blurted, her voice high, false.

Deliberately letting his tone of voice fall, deliberately goading her with his proximity, he said, “What's the matter, Kagome? I know you're not scared of heights. This isn't even high. You're barely off the floor.”

She swallowed hard. He could hear her blood whizzing through her veins. “It's not that,” she murmured. “It's . . . put me down?”

“I will,” he agreed, his claws dragging over the silken skin on the back of her knees. “After you kiss me.”

“That's blackmail,” she remarked. Her eyes were drifting closed, lulled by his touch.

“Fine. I’ll kiss you then.” He didn’t give her a chance to argue. Letting go of her legs, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her against him as his lips covered hers. Blossoming under his, blooming like the first flowers of springtime, Kagome’s lips opened to him.

Everything he’d ever wanted to tell her was in that kiss, and she returned his unspoken words with a force of her own, her voice echoing in his mind as her spirit touched his soul. Some things transcended a simple act, a carnal deliverance. Kagome and her rare and unfathomable love was one of those things.

All too soon, he drew away from her, still holding her close. She was more precious to him than anything else he’d ever known. He wanted her to understand that.

“Why do you always stop?” she asked with a long sigh. He grinned and squeezed her.

“Because,” he replied, resting his cheek on her hair, breathing in the scent of her, the smell of wildflowers in her shampoo. There were no easy answers to her question. “I want . . .” He trailed off with a frown as a familiar vehicle stopped before the house. “Because I want to get rid of that bastard.”

With that, InuYasha set Kagome back on the floor and stalked off toward the front door. Kagome glanced out the window and ran after him. “InuYasha, wait . . . I invited them.”

He turned to stare incredulously at her then groaned. “*Why?*”

She shifted nervously, wringing her hands together as he continued to eye her. “Ehh . . . happy birthday.”

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InuYasha sighed and stared out the window as Kagome and the children, along with Shippou, Kagura, and Sesshoumaru played with the children.

“Happy birthday, InuYasha. I forgot to say that before.”

He turned his head to see Rin beside him. She, too, stared outside though she had a smile on her face, and he turned back with a frown. “Thanks.”

“When are you two getting married?”

InuYasha’s head whipped to the side as he narrowed his gaze on the woman, trying to decide if she was serious. “*Married?*”

Rin shook her head. “Come on, InuYasha. Kagome’s human. For her sake, you’d better marry her.”

He shrugged. “So I’ll go ask her to marry me.”

Rin made a face. “InuYasha! If you’re going to ask her, you should at least get her a ring.”

“A ring?”

“A *diamond* ring.”

Rolling his eyes, he had to wonder what else there was to the whole thing. A diamond ring? ‘*Keh!*’ Rin cleared her throat. InuYasha shifted his gaze out of the corner of his eye to see if he could figure out what it was that bothered her. He could tell there was something else on Rin’s mind. Stubbornly, though, he refused to ask her what it was since he had a fair feeling what it could be. He wasn’t far off. “Have you given any thought to what we discussed before?”

InuYasha shrugged. “Some.”

She giggled. “You really are stubborn, aren’t you? Okay, I’ll ask then. Have you reconsidered?”

Again he shrugged. “Sort of.”

“May I ask what that means?”

InuYasha glanced down at Rin’s smiling face and flinched inwardly. He ought to be talking this over with Kagome, not her. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he growled, reaching for the door handle.

Rin’s hand stopped him. As if she could read his thoughts, she said, “It isn’t fair to raise Kagome’s hopes if you’re not sure, yourself, InuYasha.”

He felt oddly nervous, putting his thoughts into words, as though the simple act would make everything that much more real. Once he admitted it, that meant there would be no going back. Wasn’t that the real reason he’d taken so long to tell Kagome in the first place? “I thought maybe . . . human children might be all right . . . They wouldn’t be rejected, like I was.”

“It really isn’t like that anymore, InuYasha. The stigma of being hanyou isn’t really there. How do you think the youkai have survived all these years?” She sighed and smiled again. “There’s something else you really need to consider, as well.”

InuYasha stared at Rin. “What’s that?”

Rin shrugged. “Kagome’s human, yes. But she’s been marked, too. She’ll live as long as you do. But a human child will die, long before either of you. Do you think that Kagome or any mother could stand that?” Seeing the confusion filter over InuYasha’s face, she squeezed his arm and opened the door. He watched her stop and speak with Nori, who was sitting alone on the steps. Rin ruffled the girl’s hair and continued down the stairs to join the others.

*‘Do you think that Kagome could stand that?’*

He sighed. He hadn’t thought of that, and now that Rin mentioned it, he knew it was true. Kagome wouldn’t be able to handle that. For that matter, he didn’t think he would be able to, either.

Had things really changed so significantly over the centuries? If that was the case, then there wasn’t really a reason not to have children, hanyou children . . . *‘But you’ve not been treated like that since you arrived. You know it. You’re just being stubborn. To wish to protect your own is one thing. But to let fear dictate your decisions, especially one that impacts Kagome . . .’*

InuYasha glowered at the voice in his mind that was getting much too daring.

He jerked the door open and stepped outside, savoring the primitive scents in the air. Nori still sat on the step, shoulders slumped, head bent. He knelt down beside the four year-old. “Something the matter?”

The little girl shrugged. She didn’t answer right away, and InuYasha was starting to think she wasn’t going to. Finally, she drew a deep breath and sighed as if the weight of the world rested on her tiny shoulders. She dared a peek at InuYasha. As she started to speak, her tiny voice broke, and she sobbed. “They—” she broke off as she wailed, “were m-m-making fun of m-me!”

Indignant anger immediately shot to the fore. InuYasha felt his fist tighten. “Who?”

“A-a-at sch-school!”

He picked her up and cuddled her against him. The child sobbed even louder. “*Why?*” He stifled a growl. *‘I’ll tear them apart, children or not. Just because she’s a hanyou they can’t—’*

“‘Cause I l-l-lost a tooth . . . They c-called me ‘gapm-m-mouth’.”

It took a minute for InuYasha to understand what the child meant. When he did, an oddly relieved smile broke over his features. They weren’t teasing her because of what she was; they were teasing her about losing a tooth? He hugged Nori and sat her back on the step beside him.

“Don’t worry about it, Nori. You’re a hanyou. Your new tooth will be in by the time you go to school Monday.”

The little girl hiccupped and blinked as she stared up at him. “R-r-really?”

“Yeah. Then they’ll have to find someone else to tease.”

Despite the tears still pooled in Nori’s eyes, she threw herself into InuYasha’s arms with a brilliant smile. “Thanks, Uncle Inu! I love you!”



## ~~Chapter 41~~

### ~Tetsusaiqa~

InuYasha flopped down in the chair with an apparent air of dejection. Sesshoumaru wisely hid his amusement behind an otherwise bored expression. “You gave up?”

Pinning his brother with a murderous scowl, InuYasha snorted in response and flexed his claws. “I went to every jeweler in Tokyo, Sesshoumaru. There weren’t any that suited her, so yes, I gave up.”

Shippou wasn’t so kind as to hide his own humor. Having been dragged all over Tokyo with the volatile hanyou, he wasn’t about to hide the fact that he found this particularly entertaining. “He’s not kidding. We *did* go to all of them,” he remarked to Sesshoumaru.

“Shut up, Shippou,” InuYasha growled.

“What was wrong with all the rings you looked over?” Sesshoumaru asked, cutting in to stave back the inevitable head-thumping he knew was brewing in InuYasha’s mind.

InuYasha sat back with another glower directed at the kitsune youkai. Shippou laughed. Sesshoumaru shook his head. “They weren’t *big* enough,” Shippou remarked before InuYasha could answer. “And we looked at some seriously *huge* rocks.”

“It wasn’t that,” InuYasha grumbled. “There weren’t any . . .” He sighed, gripping his forehead in his clawed hand and rubbing furiously.

Sesshoumaru hid a small smile behind a thoughtful hand to his mouth. “Let me make some calls. I have a few favors due me, and I know some gentlemen who may be able to help you.”

InuYasha shook his head. “*I* want to do this,” he replied. “I don’t need your help.”

Shippou and Sesshoumaru exchanged What-Can-You-Do? looks. InuYasha, luckily, missed them.

He’d thought about what Rin had said. Her comment that Kagome might want to get married reminded him of the day she’d spent with her school friends, of the wistful look on her face when they’d all discussed their future weddings. Kagome had said she wanted something small, with only family and maybe a few close friends in attendance. He figured he could do that, for her. But this elusive thing, this diamond ring, was the trouble now. He wasn’t joking at all. Shippou and he had spent the greater portion of the day trekking from one jewelry store to

another in hopes that InuYasha could find the ring that he thought would suit Kagome. He was starting to think there wasn't such a thing.

Common logic told him that it wouldn't matter. Kagome would be thrilled, no matter what he offered her. But InuYasha wanted her to know, wanted her to understand, just how special she was to him. For that reason, none of the creations he'd looked at today were quite what he had wanted.

It just figured. It really did.

"Too bad you didn't keep any of the diamonds you made when you used the Diamond Spear Blast before," Shippou said with a chuckle. "You could have used one of those."

InuYasha was about to retort when he realized that Shippou didn't really have that bad an idea. "I've got Tetsusaiga," he remarked a little too casually.

Sesshoumaru's expression turned grave. "Do you think that throwing around the Diamond Spear Blast is a good idea? You'd destroy half your forest."

"Keh!" Unfortunately, he had to concede Sesshoumaru's point on that. Another idea occurred to him. He shot Sesshoumaru a surreptitious glance. "Your yard's big enough."

Shippou snorted. "Are you kidding? Kagura would kill him."

Sesshoumaru cast the kitsune a dark stare. "This Sesshoumaru fears not his mate."

It was InuYasha and Shippou's turn to exchange doubtful looks. "He's lying," Shippou remarked.

InuYasha nodded slowly. "He is."

"Fetch your Tetsusaiga, InuYasha."

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*"Kongousouha!"*

"Damn!" Shippou breathed, shielding his face as the diamond spears and shards flew from the Tetsusaiga. InuYasha stood back, proudly observing the wreckage left in the wake of the explosion.

"Pathetic," Sesshoumaru commented in a drier-than-usual tone. "I could have created ten times the desecration your puny attack did."

InuYasha jammed Tetsusaiga blade down into the nearly-frozen earth and paused in his task of picking through the diamonds left behind. “Be my guest, if you think you can.”

“Sesshoumaru can’t touch it,” Shippou remarked. “The last time he tried, it nearly burned off his arm.”

“Yeah, but Toga did the other day, and it didn’t hurt him. Wonder why . . . ?” InuYasha commented, still distracted as he sifted through debris.

“What do you mean, Toga did? Why were you allowing the child to touch Tetsusaiga when you knew it should have burned him?” Sesshoumaru asked, anger infiltrating his tone.

InuYasha straightened up enough to stare at his brother. “I didn’t *let* him. You make it sound like I handed the damn thing to him. He slipped. He grabbed the hilt before he fell. It was only for a few seconds, and I checked him right afterwards. It didn’t hurt him at all, though, which was sort of strange.”

Sesshoumaru didn’t answer though he looked no less pleased with InuYasha’s confession.

“Maybe,” Shippou said slowly, drawing the gaze of the other two, “the barrier on Tetsusaiga was rendered useless when you went through the well, InuYasha. Maybe your father only meant for it to be effective for a certain time, since he probably didn’t know what sort of mate you’d have. If you had a full youkai mate, your children would be youkai, you know? Surely he hadn’t meant to make it so that you couldn’t pass down Tetsusaiga down to your own son.”

InuYasha thought that over. He had to admit that it made sense. The barrier could have been destroyed in the passage of so many years. It would make sense as far as why Toga hadn’t been hurt at all when he’d touched it. “Could be. Or it could be that Tetsusaiga knows just how much of a bastard Sesshoumaru is and hates him because of it.”

Sesshoumaru didn’t answer. Slowly, deliberately, he reached out and grasped the sword’s handle. Satisfied that he wasn’t about to lose another arm, he jerked Tetsusaiga free and held it up. “Watch and learn, baby brother,” Sesshoumaru commented as the blade transformed into the fang. Grasping the hilt, drawing back the sword, Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes as he gazed off into the distance. “That yon tree,” he said, nodding his head toward a lone tree on the distant horizon.

“You can’t hit that,” Shippou scoffed.

“I should have gone with my first instinct and cut you down when you asked to marry Rin,” Sesshoumaru commented, which only served to widen the kitsune’s smile.

Sesshoumaru brought the sword down. InuYasha had to admit, at least to himself, that he was impressed with the brilliant diamond shards that flew from the sword. The spears flew over the land. Moments later, the bright explosion as the spears struck echoed in their ears. When the dust

settled, the tree that Sesshoumaru had indicated was gone. The tai-youkai nodded once at InuYasha and stuck the sword back into the ground.

“I can do *that*,” InuYasha insisted, grabbing his sword. He scanned the horizon to find a suitable target and grinned when he found it. “There,” he said, pointing Tetsusaiga’s blade at the object in question.

“Highly doubtful, baka,” Sesshoumaru taunted.

“Hide and watch,” InuYasha said with a snort. “*Kongousouha!*”

Shippou grimaced as the light burst from Tetsusaiga again, this time brighter than InuYasha’s initial strike. Sesshoumaru took the sword from InuYasha and picked his next target.

The brothers were well matched. Sesshoumaru had finesse with the sword. InuYasha had pure brute strength. Time and again they outdid one another. Shippou winced as he stared at the havoc the two were leaving in their wake. No doubt about it, Kagura was going to have both their heads. He grinned. His father-in-law was going to end up on the sofa for at least a few months for this display, and that, in Shippou’s opinion, was well worth the ringing ears he’d get from Rin for ‘letting them’ destroy the yard.

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Kagome sank down at the table with Rin and Kagura. Toga stomped through the room, inconsolable since his mother had forbidden him from going outside with the men. Kagura had maintained that it was much too cold for him.

“InuYasha tells me you’re taking some courses at the junior college,” Kagura said over her mug of tea.

“History mostly,” Kagome remarked. “That sounds kind of funny, doesn’t it?” She sat up straighter. A clap of thunder had sounded in the distance. “Strange,” she commented. “Pretty late in the year for thunderstorms.”

Rin nodded slowly. “It is, isn’t it?” She sighed. “Has InuYasha changed his mind about having a family?”

Kagome visibly stiffened at the reminder. “No, and I don’t really expect him to. He wouldn’t have said it to start with, if he hadn’t thought about it. He’s not like that.”

She stifled a sigh. If she wanted to be completely honest with herself, that was the only thing that wasn’t wonderful about her relationship with InuYasha. There had been a few times recently, when it had seemed as though he was trying to ask her something about children, about a family. Kagome had been too scared to hope, too worried to listen, and, in all those cases, too angry at

him afterward to think about it at all. She'd cut him off any way she could, because . . . It was too much to hope, that he would have changed his mind. Though she had made the choice to stay with him, she didn't know if she *could* forgive him, if he was the reason she let herself hope only to be disappointed in the end.

"Maybe if you talk to him about it," Rin said, carefully keeping her eyes averted. "Maybe he *has* changed his mind."

Kagome shrugged, hoping for nonchalance and realizing it fell well short when both Rin as well as Kagura made sympathetic noises. "I'm just happy that he came for me." That wasn't a lie. She was very happy with him. There were just moments when she found herself wishing . . .

*'Stop that, Kagome! You agreed, you know. No one made you do it.'*

"If it's meant to be, then it will be," Kagura said. "Though I must admit, it surprises me, how good he really is with children."

She smiled. "I know . . . he said he wanted to get his certificate in elementary education."

"You know, Nori thinks the sun rises and sets in him. I'm not sure what he said to her when she was having trouble at school, but she says InuYasha was the one who made her feel better."

Another rumble reverberated outside. Kagome frowned. The other women glanced toward the window but said nothing about the noise. "I have to admit," Kagura said as she refilled cups, "when Sesshoumaru suggested having InuYasha teach, I thought he had lost his mind. Maybe he knows his brother better than InuYasha would like to believe."

"It was Sesshoumaru's idea? I thought it was yours."

Kagura smiled. "Sesshoumaru gives me far too much credit, as far as InuYasha is concerned. It's hard for him to express his feelings, after all, and given the history between the two, it's understandable."

"Why did InuYasha want Tetsusaiga, anyway?" Kagome asked to change the topic as she lifted Aiko into her lap. Aiko kissed her cheek.

Kagura frowned. "I don't know. Sesshoumaru just came in and asked that I call you to have you bring it."

Kagome jumped as another dull thump sounded but this one was much louder, and it certainly wasn't thunder. The noise was vaguely familiar, something she ought to know. "What is that?" she questioned suspicion ebbing over her as she started to rise out of her chair. She *did* know that sound. But surely InuYasha wouldn't . . .

Rin stared out the window. "I don't know. I don't see . . ." she trailed off, her hand shooting up to cover her mouth as her eyes widened in disbelief. Her gasp was audible.



## ~Chapter 42~

### *Confessions of a Hanyou*

Kagome grinned as InuYasha studied the assortment of toys lining the shelves in the store. He told her to go get something for Toga's birthday. She had finally talked him into coming with her. Now that they were in the store, she'd barely gotten him to look at her for more than a few seconds. He was so curious about everything. "I guess I know what to get you next year for your birthday," she commented as he locked together a couple of Lego. He pulled them apart and clicked them back together again.

"They didn't have toys like that when I was a pup," he remarked then grimaced. "I don't actually remember having any toys, come to think about it. Think Toga would like these?"

Kagome's smile widened. Toga's affection for InuYasha bordered on hero-worship, especially since the Kongousouha incident a couple of days ago. Sesshoumaru was probably still trying to dig his way out of trouble, since Kagome had seen first-hand the evil look that Kagura had shot him when the men had come inside. Between Toga's excited yelling, InuYasha's strange behavior, Shippou's thorough enjoyment, and Kagura's dealing with Sesshoumaru, Kagome figured that life in the Inutaisho house was fairly interesting at the moment.

"I think Toga will love whatever you get him. I've never seen a child so taken with anyone before as he is with you. I think you're his idol."

InuYasha's face reddened but he smiled. Obviously, he was enjoying being the perceived 'hero'. "You think so?"

Kagome rolled her eyes and pointed at the remote control cars further down. "What about those? Souta loved those, when he was younger."

InuYasha took Kagome's hand and dragged her toward the cars.

It took nearly three hours to select a present for Toga's birthday, and even then, InuYasha had insisted on buying presents for the other kids, too. Kagome had hidden her smile as he had eyed the dolls and girls' things. He tried to mask his interest, tried to make it seem as though she was the one selecting the toys. In the end, though, he had chosen the items.

"You want something to drink?" InuYasha asked as they left the toy store.

Kagome shrugged and tried to hide her smile. If he was asking, it normally meant that he wanted it. "I could use a soda if you're thirsty."

“All right,” he agreed. “We’re not in a hurry, are we?”

She checked her watch and sighed. “We’re supposed to be at the party soon. It took longer than I thought to get Toga’s present since *someone* was having such a good time in there.”

He ignored the deliberate slur and shifted his bags to one side so that he could reach over and take Kagome’s hand in his. He led her to a table, setting the bags on the floor beneath the table. “Sit down. I’ll be back.”

Kagome sat and dug around her purse for a pen, dragging the bags toward her so that she could make sure everything was in order. At the rate they were going, they’d have to head straight to the party. She was just putting the last of the gifts into the gift sacks they’d purchased when InuYasha set a Styrofoam cup on the table before her. She didn’t glance up as she wrote names on the respective cards and put the gifts back into the store bags.

InuYasha cleared his throat. Kagome finally looked up as she slipped her pen back into her purse. “Are you okay?” she asked. He didn’t often make that sound, and he was definitely being much too quiet.

“Fine,” he said, looking unaccountably irritated.

Kagome frowned at his blatant upset. “You’re not fine. What is it?”

“Keh! I’m fine, I’m telling you. Anyway, drink your soda or we’ll be late.”

Still frowning, Kagome reached for her cup, her eyes dropping to the tabletop as she lifted it. Her hand stilled in mid-air, and she gasped softly.

Dropped over the straw and sitting on the plastic lid was a . . . *ring?*

Her gaze slowly rose, her eyes wide in stunned amazement. He wasn’t facing her. Looking pale and nervous, Kagome smiled as tears welled up in her eyes. “InuYasha?”

His ears drooped slightly, and he was obviously distressed at the incredulity in her tone. “If you don’t like it, I’ll make you another one. By the time we got done, I couldn’t tell which ones were mine and which ones were Sesshoumaru’s. I *think* those were mine, though.”

It took a moment for Kagome to figure out what he meant. Then it dawned on her. “*That’s* why you were blasting Sesshoumaru’s back yard apart? To make a diamond? *For me?*”

He finally turned his face back toward her, his eyes still downcast though traces of red were filtering into his cheeks as his ears flattened just a little lower. “If you don’t like it, just say so. I hauled Shippou all over Tokyo, and we couldn’t find one I wanted to give you, and—”

“InuYasha.”

Slowly, as though he was frightened of what he would see on her face, he lifted his eyes. Kagome smiled as two tears spilled over. She bolted around the table, throwing her arms around him and kissing him as she landed in his lap. “Will . . . you . . .?” he asked between Kagome’s kisses.

Kagome kissed him again before leaning back. “*Yes!*”

All at once, she realized that she was sitting in InuYasha’s lap in the middle of a mall cafe with total strangers staring at her with varying degrees of shock on their faces. Kagome’s embarrassment only lasted a few seconds though, before she smiled and kissed InuYasha again.

When that kiss ended, Kagome started to stand up with a heavy sigh. She’d wanted to stay there in his arms forever. Unfortunately, they were going to be late, as it was. InuYasha held onto her as he leaned to the side and dragged her soda closer. He pulled the ring off the straw and held it out to her. With a watery smile and a snuffle, Kagome stuck out her hand. InuYasha’s hands were trembling so badly that he couldn’t get the ring onto her finger the first few tries. After he finally managed to slip it into place, he kissed her knuckles. Kagome hugged him tight.

“I’m so fucking glad that’s over,” he breathed, relief heavy in his tone.

Kagome scrambled to her feet and retrieved the bags with a giggle. “We’d better hurry,” she remarked almost ruefully as she sipped her drink.

InuYasha took the bags from her. He was quiet while they wandered through the mall.

Her gaze wandered to the baby store window, the one that she’d dragged InuYasha into before. She forced her eyes away before she could think about what she wouldn’t have too much and concentrated instead on the ring that InuYasha had just given her. It really was beautiful. One solitary diamond, marquise cut with three fat round diamonds on either side, Kagome couldn’t believe that InuYasha had actually resorted to destroying Sesshoumaru’s back yard just to create the diamonds for her ring.

Kagome was startled out of her musings when InuYasha tugged gently on her arm as he veered over toward a store. Kagome frowned. He was heading into the baby store? “Why are we going in here?”

He didn’t answer right away. Her stomach was tied in knots, and she felt the kindling of hope trying to spark. Did she dare? *‘Still,’* she thought, *‘why come in here if . . .’* She couldn’t finish the question, even to herself.

“I thought you liked looking around here,” he remarked, picking up a stuffed puppy. He made a face at it and let it drop back onto the display table. Kagome stared at InuYasha, afraid to believe what she could tell from his expression. He was nervous? Why would he be? Unless . . . He turned and stared at her. “You want them, right? Pups?”

A cautious hope, a slow kindling of a dream she had left behind flickered to life. “Do . . . do you?” she asked, shaking her head slowly as her chest constricted painfully.

He made a face but his eyes shined when he stared at her. “A couple might not be so bad,” he replied in his normal gruff way. “I mean, maybe not right away, but someday . . . if you still want them? Whenever you want them.”

She started to smile. A sudden thought, however, stopped her, and she bit her bottom lip. “You’re not changing your mind because of me, are you? I understood your reasons. I know how painful your childhood was . . .” She stood motionless, twisting the ring around on her finger.

InuYasha stepped over to her, drew her into his arms, kissed her forehead. “You’re part of the reason, but I didn’t change my mind just to make you happy. I’ve always wanted children. With any luck, they’ll be more like you than me.”

She craned her neck back to stare at him. He was smiling, and there was a peace in his expression that she’d never seen before. She felt the prick of tears on the back of her eyes. Seconds later her vision blurred, and she laughed suddenly. He caught her tear and licked his finger. “What’d you wish for?”

He shook his head, his face reddening under her scrutiny. “I . . . I wished that you’d always look at me . . . like that.”

Kagome burst into tears mixed with laughter. It was an odd combination, but it suited her perfectly. She fished around in her purse for a kerchief and dabbed at her eyes as she giggled again. “We’re going to be so late . . .”

He heaved a sigh in protest but let her lead him out of the store. Kagome glanced back at him. That content look was still on his face. She grinned. She knew the feeling . . .

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Toga frowned as InuYasha handed each of the girls the gifts he brought them. “It’s not *their* birthday,” Toga grumbled. “Why do *they* get presents?”

InuYasha shook his head slightly and held out Toga’s gift. “You want it or not?”

Toga’s frown vanished and he hopped up and down. “Gimme!” He snatched the bag and ran over to sit on the floor. He wasn’t completely seated before he started digging into the huge gift sack.

InuYasha crossed his arms and leaned toward Kagome. “Think that bastard of a brother of mine is still in trouble?” he asked quietly.

Kagome shook her head as Kagura shot Sesshoumaru a bemused smile. Sesshoumaru winked back at his wife. Kagura flushed just a little. Kagome's mouth fell open in shock. "Nope, I'd say not."

She could feel InuYasha's stare. Her heart sped up as she spared him a glance. The way he gazed at her made her stomach feel entirely unsettled in a very nice way.

Aiko tugged on Kagome's hand, with a start, she dragged her attention of her hanyou and redirected it to the little girl who was busy showing her the doll InuYasha had chosen.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched as InuYasha crossed the room to kneel down on the floor with Toga. Heads bent close, Toga somehow talked InuYasha into helping him put together the K'nex roller coaster. Kagome shook her head. She had a feeling that wasn't going to be a pretty sight.

"So this is why those two tore up my yard?" Kagura asked as she lifted Kagome's hand to eye the ring. "At least he got what he needed then." Kagura sighed but smiled. "Congratulations, Kagome. When are you two getting married?"

Kagome hadn't even thought about it. "We haven't actually talked about that," she hedged.

"Gimme the `structions, Uncle Yasha!" Toga hollered.

InuYasha held the booklet out of the child's reach. "We don't need the instructions," he said with a decisive snort. "How hard can it be?"

Sesshoumaru reached over and nabbed the instructions out of InuYasha's hand. "It's foolishness like that that makes me shudder to think that your children *might* inherit some of your genes. Keep Uncle Yasha away from your toy, Toga, unless you want it wrecked beyond repair."

"Keh!" InuYasha shot back. "Being related to you hasn't seemed to hurt your pups." As he stood, Nori threw herself at him. He caught her and tossed her in the air and caught her. Nori screeched in laughter. Rin clutched her chest and gasped. Shippou rolled his eyes.

"Look! My tooth grew back!" Nori said, stretching her mouth open wide.

InuYasha set her back down and nodded. "Told you."

Kagome could only grin as she watched him interacting with the children. They adored him, and, she could tell, the feeling was mutual. Her smile widened as she remembered his words in the baby store and wondered just how many `a couple' children would be to InuYasha . . .

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## ~Chapter 43~

### ~Promise of Forever~

Closing the door with a soft sigh, InuYasha leaned back against it as Kagome dropped her purse on the hall table. She let her head fall back, her hand on her neck, and she rolled her head slowly from side to side. From the birthday party, InuYasha had dragged her to the shrine to tell her family the good news. Mrs. Higurashi had been thrilled and had insisted upon cooking a traditional celebratory meal for the couple.

Kagome smiled wanly, remembering her mother's reaction as Kagome had showed her the ring.

Mrs. Higurashi's eyes had grown huge as she stared at her daughter's hand. "This must have cost you a fortune, InuYasha!" she gasped, looking a little appalled at the absolute size of the stones in the ring.

InuYasha shrugged conspicuously and stared at the floor, pink cheeked, and obviously embarrassed. "It really didn't cost that much." Then he glanced at Kagome, as though he expected her to be upset by his confession.

"He made the diamonds."

Mrs. Higurashi's eyebrows rose in surprise. "He . . . how?"

InuYasha ended up having to explain to her whole family how the Kongousouha worked.

Through the entire meal, all Mrs. Higurashi talked about was the wedding. Kagome, at first, had been uncomfortable. She hadn't actually discussed any of it with InuYasha, and he, for the most part, was talking to Souta about different sword tactics. After a few of Kagome's vague answers, Mrs. Higurashi had turned to InuYasha and asked him if there was anything in particular he wanted for the wedding. InuYasha had shook his head and assured Mrs. Higurashi that whatever she and Kagome came up with would be fine so long as it wasn't a huge affair, and so long as he didn't have to wear shoes that pinched his feet.

"Yes, have you two discussed when you want to get married? Or where?"

Kagome glanced over at InuYasha. He was staring at her in that way again, the way that made her want to dissolve into a puddle of raw nerves. "Goshinboku," they both replied quietly.

"But when?" Mrs. Higurashi persisted.

InuYasha shrugged. "How soon can we do it?"

Kagome had been surprised by his answer. "Well, I'm still underage," she said slowly.

Mrs. Higurashi waved her hand dismissively. "You're underage without parental consent, and you have a mother who would be more than happy to give her consent."

Kagome stared at Mrs. Higurashi in surprise. She hadn't expected that. "Really?"

Mrs. Higurashi smiled. "Kagome, if there were ever two people who were meant to be together, it's you two."

InuYasha's soft voice cut through Kagome's reverie. She blinked to clear her mind and smiled at the hanyou. "I think if it was up to your mother we'd be married tomorrow."

Kagome grimaced and shuffled off toward the bedroom. "I'm going to bathe. Can I borrow one of your shirts?"

"Keh! Like I care. You look better in them than I do, anyway."

She flushed as she pulled one out of his closet then headed off to take a shower.

It did wonders for her, actually. Gone was the stiffness in her shoulders and neck. The hot water soothed away the fatigue of the day and served to invigorate her. By the time she was done toweling off, Kagome was smiling and wide awake.

InuYasha was propped up on the bed, leaning back against the headboard with a frown of concentration as he stared down at the papers spilling off his lap. Obviously grading some tests, Kagome had been pleasantly surprised when he'd mentioned to her before that he enjoyed teaching the younger kids and was thinking about trying to earn his elementary education permit. He could do it, she was sure. He certainly was a quick study on things. It amazed her, how quickly he had adapted to her time.

The puppies frolicked on the bed, skittering on the slick papers in their play. InuYasha didn't seem to notice them at all. Then one of the boys—the black one that Kagome had already known was destined to be the orneriest out of the group—tugged InuYasha's hair. InuYasha reached over and thumped the puppy on the head with his index finger without looking up from his task. The puppy backed away and plopped down before whining sadly. InuYasha reached over and scratched the pup's ears gently. Satisfied, the animal hopped up and lunged after the others.

She sank down on the edge of the bed. The puppies descended on her. Kagome giggled as the wiggling warm bodies scampered around her. InuYasha finally looked up from the paperwork with a smile. He scooped the papers together and slid them into the black leather binder. "I'm going to go brush my teeth. That `whatever-it-was' your mother made was spicy." He made a face. Kagome grinned. She'd actually been surprised that he'd eaten any of it. Poor hanyou. "You want anything while I'm up?"

Kagome shook her head and made a face as one of the puppies latched onto her hair and tugged. InuYasha growled a warning at the errant pup, who immediately let go and scampered to the edge of the bed. She leaned down with her front legs splayed, rear end sticking up while her tail wiggled furiously. She barked at InuYasha. He chuckled and put the puppies on the floor. “Go on,” he remarked, herding the pups toward the doorway. “Get out of here.”

Dammit got up and paused long enough to let Kagome scratch her head before she followed InuYasha and the puppies out of the room.

Kagome crawled over onto the bed and flopped down with a smile. She sat up and tugged the shirt down over her legs before hooking her arms around her raised knees with a contented sigh.

The sound of claws grazing over wood drew her attention. She turned her face toward the doorway. InuYasha stood there, hands gripping the frame above his head, elbows bent. He leaned forward slightly, lazily. He’d removed his shirt in the bathroom, and Kagome couldn’t help but appreciate the way his skin glowed golden in the dim lamplight. But it was the look in his half-closed eyes that brought a flush to her cheeks, a rapid hammering of her heart. Her breath caught before it reached her lungs, and she stared, transfixed, caught in his gaze.

“I want you.”

His words shot through her, tightened around her soul. A hundred thoughts, a thousand emotions, a million unspoken words drifted in the air to him. Her entire being felt like glass blown too thin, ready to either be let go or she would shatter. Unable to speak, she nodded once. Still he remained where he stood.

Slowly, deliberately, he let go of the doorframe and stepped forward. His gaze never faltered. His words, spoken so long ago, came back to her, echoed through her mind with the subtlety of a summer breeze. *‘For me it’s got to be forever with you.’* She wanted to smile but she didn’t dare. Too serious a vow was made, too stark a thing—living, breathing, pulsing between them. She could feel it. He promised her forever, and she promised him that, too.

And he came to her, leaned over her, forced her back against the pillows, kissed her gently, softly, a kiss to soothe her, a kiss meant to remove the unsettling feeling that she was coming entirely undone. Her hands lifted to cup his face, to stroke his cheeks. Her mind registered the moisture under her fingertips. “Why are you crying?” she asked, her voice tender, soft, a whisper in the silence.

He shook his head, nuzzling his cheek against hers. His tone was as incredulous, as though he was amazed at his own sentiments. “I don’t know.”

She turned his face toward hers. The molten gold of his eyes was bright, shining. She leaned up, kissing away his tears, as he had done for her before. Words fell away, leaving only emotion behind. His lips sought out hers again. Her hands fell to his chest. She learned his body by touch, reveled in the spirit of him. Vibrant, powerful, alive, his muscles rippled under his skin as he

stroked her cheek, caressed her throat, lowered his lips to the pulse that fluttered, surged, called to him.

Fire burned in her veins, leaving her weak yet with an odd strength as she heard a vague popping, one by one, as if something was deliberately being stretched to the breaking point, and it had to give. Cool air hit her overheated flesh, and Kagome understood. Unwilling to take his attention off of what he was doing, InuYasha had cut away the buttons that held the shirt closed. She arched against him, needing to feel his flesh against hers. He growled in her ear.

“Forever, Kagome.”

“Forever,” she agreed, her tone strangled, breathless. She gasped as his palm brushed over her then came back to settle over her heart. “Don’t stop,” she pleaded, her breathing stuttered, halting. Her mind was dissolving. She needed to say it before she couldn’t.

His chuckle was uneven in response to her demand. “You think I can?”

Her giggle was cut short when his mouth delved lower. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as his mouth closed over her breast, drawing her off the bed with a harsh cry ripped from her soul. The torrent of tactile emotion surged around her, cradling her and yet unsettling her. A wanton desire, a blatant need, the will to dominate or be dominated, it didn’t matter which . . . Kagome didn’t fight the rush of heat that coursed through her. As if her entire life had led to this one moment, she realized with remarkable clarity that this was where she belonged.

He strained against her, shuddered under her hands. His entire body quivered. Trying to soothe him with her touch, Kagome wrapped her arms around him, bringing him tightly against her. But the feel of his flesh against hers was like a scalding brand. She whimpered, and he kissed her.

Dragging his body off of hers, Kagome opened her eyes as she struggled to sit up and stared as InuYasha discarded his pants. Her gaze skittered away. He chuckled. When he didn’t move, though, she dared a glance at his face. He stood, staring at her as though he was trying to memorize everything about her. Instinctively, she started to draw the shirt closed. His hands shot out to stop her, pushing the shirt from her shoulders. It pooled around her on the coverlet. She shivered but couldn’t tell if it was the air in the room or the way he stared at her. Wrapping his hands around her arms, he dragged her to him, mouth dropping onto hers with a barely-contained ferocity. She gasped. He growled. A part of her felt as though it was melting, and the increasing need, the physical desire became an ache deep within her. He completed her yet left her feeling as though there was something missing. If she could think, if she could piece together any semblance of coherency, she might be able to figure out what it was that she needed, she thought wildly.

And suddenly she was lying on her back again, and InuYasha was staring down at her, a fierce smile on his face, the look of a man who was about to have everything he’d ever dreamed of. “Please . . .” she whispered. She felt him, silently asking her, waiting for her permission?

She lifted her hips against his, opening herself to him, offering him what he wanted and what she needed.

The shocking feel of being completely whole, carried forward on a surge of heat. Visceral instinct combined with the need to cherish, and he held her, kissed her, comforted her as she felt as though she was coming undone. She whimpered his name against his lips. His low rumble sounded in her ear even as he growled. Reacting to the unadulterated emotion, reaching for the elusive heights of the stars, he led her gently. The tremors in his body were magnified, and Kagome understood how much it cost him to let her have this. Controlling his baser instincts, he gave her what she needed.

A nearly painful ache built inside her, she tried to tell him, tried to show him. She dug her fingernails into his back in her frustration, balancing on the cusp of something both terrifying and insistent. The only thing she knew was the fear that if she didn't hold onto InuYasha that he would somehow slip away from her, into the darkness just beyond the veil.

His body reacted to hers, and suddenly she was too close to the edge, and she couldn't turn back. One more shove, and she fell as blinding light the color of her spiritual energy engulfed her, soothed her, even as she could feel her body shatter into the shards that flew out to cover the earth. She cried out. She vaguely heard InuYasha answer with his own rasping entreaty.

InuYasha collapsed in her arms, pinning her down as her body drew itself back together. It was a slow process. Her heart raced in her chest, his thumping in an erratic pattern that somehow matched hers. Suddenly, she understood and smiled. The marking had only been a part of the ritual. This had been the other part. Existing as two wholly separate individuals, they shared the same heart. It was a beautiful thing.

With a soft moan, InuYasha rolled, dragging her with him. She was content to be held. He stroked her shoulder gently, idly. She pushed his hair out of his eyes and leaned up to kiss him.

"I never realized how tiny your hands really are," InuYasha said, breaking the comfortable silence as he twined his fingers together with hers. "Are you sure this ring is all right?"

She stretched and sighed, happy, content. "It's perfect, InuYasha, and it's only a ring, anyway. It could have been plastic, and I wouldn't have cared."

"Keh!" He leaned across her to drag the coverlet over them both.

"I'm so happy you came after me," she admitted. "I hoped I was doing the right thing . . . I only wanted . . ." she sighed, unable to finish her thought out loud.

He let go of her hand and lifted her chin to make her look at him. "Why did you think I would want Kikyō to come back?"

She sighed. "You called after her. You didn't want her to go . . . You sounded so sad, and I just wanted you to be happy."



## ~Chapter 44~

### ~Jealousy~

InuYasha stared at Kagome's hand clasped in his own as the wink of gold caught the morning sunlight that filtered through the bedroom windows. *'This feels weird,'* he thought with a frown as he stared at his wedding ring, so strange looking under his claws and with his fingers twisted together with Kagome's. Her diamonds glinted in the light. He smiled, feeling inordinately proud of himself for that. He could tell from the radiance of her face as she had come to him under Goshinboku that a life with him really was what she wanted.

Because she had asked him to, he'd worn the old fire rat clothes. He hadn't figured anyone would be looking at him during the ceremony, anyway, and he was right. Everyone had stared at Kagome as she had come to him, dressed in a simple white silk kimono that needed no embellishment. She was all the decoration that had been needed. She was his Shikon no Tama, and he was her sworn protector. *'Forever,'* he thought with a smile. They were officially bonded, in every single way. True, he'd never actually witnessed a human wedding ceremony before. But Kagome had seemed sincerely happy, and that was enough for him. She'd said last night that the wedding had been everything she'd wanted, which was something considering Mrs. Higurashi had made good on her promise to hurry the planning. Three weeks from the day he'd proposed, to be exact.

Glancing around their bedroom, he grinned. Kagome hadn't wasted any time spreading her things around. Not overwhelming, the feminine touches she'd added to the house seemed right, to him, belonging here just as she, herself, did.

She'd finally let him move her things in the night before the wedding though she had slept at the shrine one last time then. She'd also adamantly refused to let him inside her room, which, at the time, had irritated him to the point that he'd ended up spending the night propped against her window, not that she could see that. Curtains drawn and window locked, she had probably even locked her bedroom door in case he tried to get in that way. *'It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding,'* she'd told him.

*'Keh!'*

Though he had to admit that it had been entertaining to see Sesshoumaru, Kagura, and Shippou in their more familiar attire. InuYasha hadn't realized that Sesshoumaru still had his ceremonial white garb. The humans in attendance had been a little intimidated by the youkai—even the children, who had been dressed in traditional clothes, as well. InuYasha had to do a double take when Aiko had run to him in an elaborate kimono like Kagura's but in the colors of the House of the tai-youkai. During the short reception that followed, Toga—the little trouble maker—had

fussed loud and often that his clothes made him itch. Even Sesshoumaru had been at a loss as to how to make the boy stop. In the end, Kagome had coaxed Toga into dancing with her. Whatever she'd said to the boy during that dance had made the difference, though. Toga hadn't complained again, and later . . .

InuYasha grinned, remembering his talk with the boy.

Toga was sitting alone under Goshinboku. Head bowed slightly, looking sad, InuYasha remembered how he used to sit there, under that tree, in deep thought as Toga was now. Kagome had changed all that, as she had so completely changed him. It was not intentional, he was sure. She'd never asked him to be anything other than what he was. Yet in her always kind way, Kagome had done it. Because of her and despite himself, he was a better person for it.

InuYasha squatted beside the boy. "Something wrong, Toga?"

Toga shrugged, trying his hardest to seem unconcerned. "No . . ."

"You sure?"

"Yeah . . ."

InuYasha waited another moment then slowly pushed himself to his feet to head back inside before Kagome came looking for him. "Suit yourself."

"Uncle Yasha?"

InuYasha turned back to face the boy, who had also stood. Toga shuffled his feet, staring at the ground. "Toga?"

"You married her? Like a human ceremony? But you're hanyou—half-youkai. Why?"

InuYasha knelt down before Toga and made the child look at him. "Because Kagome's human. Because this wedding made her happy. Because I love her. Toga, when you meet a girl and feel about her like I feel about Kagome, you'll understand."

Toga's frown deepened. "But why did you have to marry *Kagome*?"

InuYasha grinned as understanding dawned on him. Toga had a crush on Kagome. "Some day you'll find your own Kagome."

Toga looked doubtful. Then he scowled and turned his glower on InuYasha. "Don't you hurt her, Uncle Yasha, or I'll have to come after you. Father's going to teach me to use Tokijin. I'll use it on you if you do!"

InuYasha hid his amusement at the boy's protective nature. "Don't worry, Toga. I won't hurt her, I promise. Now come on back inside before your father and mother start thinking you've run away, okay?"

Toga fell in step beside InuYasha as they headed back into the shrine. "Uncle Yasha . . ."

"Hmm?"

"When are you and Kagome going to have babies?"

InuYasha stopped mid-stride to stare at the boy. "Does your father know you're asking me that?"

Toga shook his head quickly. "No, and Rin said it isn't nice to ask, but people love babies, don't they? Mama and Rin sure do." Toga made a face. "I was just thinking, though, that if you and Kagome had babies, maybe you'd have boys, and then I'd have someone to play with."

InuYasha smiled as the memory faded. Kagome stirred in his arms, her eyes fluttering slowly, as though she wasn't quite ready to wake up. His grin widened. *We were up pretty late last night. .*

"Morning," Kagome mumbled, smiling drowsily. InuYasha kissed her forehead. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long," he said. Idly, he ran his claws along the mark. She shivered and cuddled closer to him. He let his claws drag along Kagome's hip. She giggled.

"So what do you think?" she asked, rolling onto his chest and resting her chin on her clasped hands.

He was preoccupied with her hair, wrapping it around his finger and letting go to watch it fall. "About what?"

She sighed. "About being married!"

He made a face as she wrapped her fingers around his dormant prayer beads. "The ring feels weird."

Kagome reached over and grabbed her pillow to whack InuYasha in the face. He pushed the pillow away and smirked. "I'm hanyou, remember? You can't hurt me."

She rolled off the bed, dragging the sheet with her to wrap around herself before InuYasha could catch her. "Where are you going?" he called after her.

She peeked back into the bedroom with an impish grin. "Some of us have school today, remember?"

InuYasha's eyes widened as he shot off the bed. *'Damn, I forgot!'* He was substituting this week and hadn't been able to get out of it. Many of the schools' teachers were coming down with a nasty strain of flu that put them out for a week at a time. While InuYasha enjoyed his job much more than he had ever thought he would, he had been told that he was supposed to have something called a 'honeymoon' after he married Kagome.

He would have told Kagura he couldn't do it, anyway. But when the semester break had come at the college, Kagome had signed up for more classes. Since she seemed excited about attending those, he figured he might as well do something, too.

He heard the soft gurgle of the pipes as Kagome started up a shower. He considered joining her but after another glance at the clock, he knew he didn't have time for the excursion . . . at least not time enough to properly show Kagome what she meant to him. It didn't help, either, that he knew that she was completely naked, completely vulnerable, and that she wouldn't be likely to protest if he did step in with her. He sighed. He *might* have enough time for a dip in the frigid pond, though.

With a grimace, InuYasha ripped off the clothes he'd just put on as he headed for the back door and the pond outside. *'Small consolation that today is a short school day,'* he thought as he dove into the insanely cold water.

Still he grinned as he surfaced despite the knowledge that he was willingly subjecting himself to hypothermia. Kagome had, after all, promised to spend the entire summer at his beck and call. Damned if that didn't sound like something he would thoroughly enjoy . . .

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Kagome gathered her things together and packed them into her bag when class was over. She sighed. She loved taking the courses, sure. But she'd been so preoccupied most of the day that she doubted she remembered anything that the teachers had said. It was unsettling yet wholly comforting, when she'd first arrived in class and had informed the instructor that he needed to change her name in the ledger from Higurashi to Izayoi. She grinned.

Shuffling out of the class with the rest of the students and thinking about stopping on the way home to pick up something special to make for InuYasha's dinner, she gasped as a strong hand fastened onto her arm, dragging her out of the exiting students. She whirled around and glared at her would-be assailant. "Houjou?"

"Got time to go for coffee?"

Kagome hesitated. *'InuYasha won't like this,'* her conscience insisted. Maybe not, but she needed to tell Houjou, at least, before he heard that she'd married InuYasha from someone else—like InuYasha. "As long as it doesn't take too long," she agreed.

Houjou seemed to relax a little. He escorted her out of the building and around the corner to a small coffee house that catered to the junior college crowd. Kagome slid into the chair that Houjou offered her at one of the smaller tables set back from the main part of the place. She ordered an espresso and smiled politely at Houjou until the waitress hurried away to get their drinks.

Houjou broke the silence first. “Eri tells me you married . . . *him*. Why, Kagome?”

Kagome shrugged. “I love him. He’s my ma—soul mate.” She smiled to herself at what she’d almost said. *But he is your mate. That’s what he calls it, anyway. I call it marriage. He calls it mated. What does it matter, as long as it is the same thing and as long as it makes us happy?*

“You’re too good for a dog like Izayoi,” Houjou scoffed, his cheeks reddening as he stared at his fists on the tabletop.

Kagome blinked. She knew as well as anyone that *inu* meant *dog*. Was that what Houjou was doing? Making fun of InuYasha’s name? Somehow, she had a feeling that it wasn’t what he was doing at all, that it was something that went far deeper than a jab at InuYasha’s heritage.

She refrained from comment as the waitress returned with their drinks. Something about Houjou’s expression reminded her of another youkai . . . Kouga? It dawned on her. Was Houjou somehow Kouga’s reincarnation? “Don’t make fun of him, Houjou. He is my husband, and that’s not going to change.”

Houjou’s eyes were fierce, dark, angry. She drew back when he pinned her with a glower. “You were *my* woman, Kagome! Then he came along, and—”

Her voice was soft, apologetic. “I was never anyone’s *woman*.” Grabbing her purse, Kagome dug around for some money and tossed it onto the table as she stood. “I think this was a mistake. Goodbye, Houjou.”

He jumped up and ran after her, catching up with her outside. “Kagome, wait!”

She rubbed her forehead and didn’t even try to smile. “I don’t think there’s really anything left to say.”

“I’m sorry.” Houjou looked miserable.

The memory of Kouga, dying in her arms . . . and she was sure. Houjou really was Kouga’s reincarnation . . . She relented with a slight smile, unwilling to let his soul remain unhappy. As infuriating as the wolf youkai had been, Kouga had also been a true friend to her, as well, and Houjou . . . He had been one, too. “Don’t be sorry. I’m not.” She leaned up on tip-toe and kissed Houjou’s cheek. Then she turned and walked away.

She didn’t see the silver haired hanyou standing on the opposite corner with his hands balled into fists, claws digging into his flesh until he smelled blood. Eyes flashing red momentarily, it took

every last bit of self-control he had to turn and walk away when all he wanted to do was to hurtle himself across the busy street and use Houjou to sweep the sidewalk.

-=-=-=-=-=-

InuYasha wasn't home. After stopping at the grocery store to pick up the ingredients to make a special dinner for him, she knew she was running late. He should have been home long before her.

The food was keeping warm on top of the stove. Kagome sank down on the sofa with her history book and notes. The pup they'd decided to keep hopped up next to her, laying his head on her leg and staring at her as though he was attempting to comfort her. "Where's InuYasha, Kanaye?" she asked the dog. Kanaye wagged his tail.

Kagome glanced toward the row of windows that overlooked the front yard and driveway. Still no sign of InuYasha. It didn't matter that she knew that worrying about where he was wouldn't make him come home any quicker. He could take care of himself, she was certain. But a tiny voice in the back of her mind whispered to her, made her doubt. *'Where is he? Come on, Kagome, you're worrying over nothing.'*

*'Still . . .'*

*'He probably just stopped to see Sesshoumaru or something. He's fine, and you know it.'*

She'd know if there was something really worth worrying over. Hadn't she always been able to sense if he was in trouble? She couldn't keep her mind on the homework, and finally, with a heavy sigh, she closed the book.

She stirred the food on the stove and grabbed her coat so she could let the dogs out the back door. The wind had picked up. Flipping her head to get the hair out of her face, Kagome gasped as the soft voice spoke. "I saw you with Houjou today."

He was sitting in the tree beside the porch. Relief that he was fine warred with irritation that he would have been here the entire time. Kagome settled for a frown designed to let him know that he was in the wrong. "He came to the college today and asked if I would have coffee with him. I thought I should tell him that we're married, is all."

"Keh! I don't care." He hopped out of the tree and stomped past her into the house. She followed after him with the dogs. They ran straight to InuYasha, hopping up and down in greeting. He spared a moment to pet them both before trudging off to change clothes.

Kagome twisted the ring on her finger as she wrinkled her nose at InuYasha's irritation. She squared her shoulders and followed him. "If you don't care, then why are you so upset?" she asked in a reasonable tone.

He stopped unbuttoning his shirt and let his hands fall to the sides before rounding to stare at her as though he couldn't believe she'd even had to ask such a question. "You *kissed* him! I *saw* you."

Understanding dawned on her, and she stifled the grin that rose to the surface. "On the cheek, InuYasha . . . I was saying goodbye. That's all."

He looked slightly pacified though the mulish set of his lips was still there. "I don't see why you had to kiss him."

She stepped over to him and kissed his cheek. "That's all it was; just like that."

He thought that over for a moment, as though trying to decide if her reasoning was good enough. An enigmatic smile turned the corners of his lips, and he smirked at her. "Show me how you kiss me?"

Kagome didn't answer. Instead she wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his head down to meet hers. She brushed her lips over his once, twice . . . flicked her tongue over his bottom lip, sucked it gently as he sighed.

Her hands twisted in his hair, tangled in his silky locks. She wanted time to stand still. It felt so good to be in his arms. He took control of the kiss, wrapping his arms around her, teasing her sides, idly rubbing the swell of her breasts through her blouse. His claws were lethal in more ways than one. Undoubtedly one of the strongest weapons in his sensual array, he used those claws on her without taking any prisoners. He reached down to pull up her leg, holding it against his him as he pushed against her. She moaned as heat shot through her, delicious, heady, perfect.

All too soon, though, he pulled away, nose wrinkling as he sniffed the air, a troubled light in those amazing golden eyes. "Uh . . . Kagome?"

"Hmm?" she asked, idly touching the hollows of his collarbone. He shivered under her touch, forgetting for a moment what had drawn his attention as her lips grazed over the hard ridges, as her hips pressed harder against his. A soft groan rewarded her, a gentle noise that sounded fierce at the same time. He was so many things that she loved, and the mix of emotions, the torrent of feeling that he unleashed in her was something that she would never get used to. Her hands running up and down his spine, she loved the hollows in the small of his back. "You were saying, InuYasha?" she murmured against his skin.

"Was I saying something?" he gasped out, bemused. Suddenly his back stiffened, his head turned, and he sniffed yet again. "Uh, Kagome? Is something burning?"

Kagome gasped and bolted, remembering too late that she'd left dinner on the stove. Judging from the pungent smell, the food was beyond saving. Though she groaned in dismay as she turned off the burners, she couldn't help the ironic smile that surfaced.



## ~Chapter 45~

### ~Full Moon~

“Happy birthday.”

Kagome stared suspiciously at the big box sitting on the table, wrapped in bright paper. She glanced at InuYasha, who was rummaging around in the refrigerator. He got out the remnants of her birthday cake and set it on the counter. “Want some?” Shaking her head slowly, Kagome took a step closer to the present. “It won’t bite,” he pointed out as he dug into the cake without bothering with a plate or utensils.

“My birthday was yesterday,” she said slowly, still unwilling to touch the box. “And you already gave me a gift.”

“I can take that one back, if you don’t want it.”

She stared at the box for another minute. Then she slowly reached up and tore away the paper.

A plain brown cardboard box greeted her. She could feel InuYasha’s eyes on her as he waited for her reaction. Why did she feel an unsettling sense of anticipation, as though whatever was in that box would change her life completely? Very carefully she opened the lid.

“What . . .?” She pulled packages of disposable diapers out of the box and stared at them, dumbfounded. “*InuYasha?*”

He kept his gaze on the cake and shrugged. “One thing, Kagome. I’m *not* changing those.”

She smiled and set the bag of diapers on the table before slowly ambling over to InuYasha. “So . . . you’re telling me you’re ready to start a family? Now?”

He shrugged again. “Now . . . next month . . . month after that . . . is there an expiration date on those diaper-things?”

It dawned on her, why he’d waited until today to give her that gift. “Tonight’s the full moon,” she commented softly.

His cheeks reddened a little but he raised his eyebrows to proclaim his innocence. “I hadn’t noticed.”

Kagome grinned unrepentantly. “You’re an awful actor, did I ever tell you? I noticed it months ago.”

He lifted her and sat her on the counter. She broke off a piece of cake and offered it to him. He took it and licked the icing off her fingers. A distinct shiver ran up her spine. InuYasha was in a very playful mood . . .

“InuYasha . . . I know you’ve said you want children, and I’m glad . . . but are you absolutely sure? If you’re not—”

He rolled his eyes but smiled just a little. “I’m absolutely sure.”

“Because if you’re not, you can tell me. We don’t have to hurry anything.”

InuYasha dragged his claws idly up and down the sides of her legs. “You’re the one who sounds like you’re not sure,” he remarked quietly. “Have you changed your mind?”

She squirmed. His claws tickled. “No, not at all.”

“Toga wants us to have a son, did you know?”

“Toga does?” she echoed, trying to focus her attention on what he was saying instead of what he was doing. “When did he say this?”

“The day we got married. He said he wants more boys in the family.”

In an effort to distract him, Kagome reached over and broke off another bite of cake. He let her feed him, again licking her fingers clean afterward.

The phone rang. Kagome leaned over and grabbed the cordless phone. “Izayoi.”

“Yes, this is Sesshoumaru. Is that worthless brother of mine busy?”

Kagome smirked. If she didn’t know better, she’d be scared that the two were going to beat each other senseless all over again. “Sure. Just a moment.” She held the phone out to InuYasha. He stared at it like he thought it was about to bite him. “It’s your brother, InuYasha, and be nice, for once.”

“Keh!” he snorted. He took the phone and held it near his ear as he dragged Kagome forward and set her back on her feet.

She smiled to herself as she gathered up the diapers and headed down the hallway. They hadn’t actually discussed which room would be the nursery. But she’d rather use the closest room for a baby, and she had a feeling that InuYasha wouldn’t mind.

*‘The full moon . . . the one night, if we are together, we’ll have a child—a pup. And he wants one . . .’*

InuYasha stomped into the room with a fierce scowl on his features, a look she knew well from their time traveling together, searching for the shards. It was a look, however, that he hadn’t had nearly as often since he’d been in her time, and most notably not since they’d been married. That he should be sporting it now, after his talk with Sesshoumaru, was telling.

“Sesshoumaru have anything interesting to say?” she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone.

“Keh!” he snorted, sinking down on the floor in his usual fashion. Kagome hid her amusement as she turned away, stacking the packages of diapers in the empty closet. “Just being his normal bastard self.”

“InuYasha . . . if we’re going to have children, don’t you think you should stop calling their family members stuff like that?”

“I wouldn’t if he wasn’t one,” InuYasha shot back then sighed. “I’m pretty sure that having a brother like Sesshoumaru is some sort of perverse retaliation for something I did wrong in a past life,” he grumbled.

“Now you’re being harsh.” She knelt down beside him and rubbed his ear. His eyes drifted closed and the frown disappeared as he smiled almost dreamily and leaned into her touch. “Why did he really call?”

“To remind me that tonight’s the full moon, as if I didn’t know that already.”

Kagome flushed. “I don’t think I like how this works, InuYasha. I mean, everyone will know when we did . . . things . . .”

His eyes opened and he pinned her with a calculated stare. “And you don’t think they know we’ve done things already?”

“Not like that,” she countered as she felt her face grow even hotter. “But some things should stay private, just between us . . .”

He made a show of sighing, crossing his arms over his chest as he stood up and stalked over to the window. “If that’s how you feel about it, I understand. It’ll be harder to have pups that way, though.”

If she’d had anything in her hand, she would have thrown it at him for his deliberate teasing. She straightened up and headed out of the room instead. “Well, it’s getting late, and I’m tired. Night, InuYasha.”

She didn’t have to look to know that his ears were twitching. *‘One . . . two . . . thr—’*

He scooped her up into his arms. She hid her smile against his shoulder as he carried her into the bedroom and set her down on the edge of the bed. Sometimes it was frightening, how well she knew him.

Still, she looked away as he started undressing. The familiar and pleasant heat sifted through her belly as she heard his clothes hitting the floor. She'd touched him more times than she could remember. She knew his body as well as she knew her own. Still, some things ran too deep. She'd never been able to stare at him without completely losing her composure. Now was no different.

InuYasha grinned as Kagome stared at the coverlet, hands folded together in her lap as she carefully averted her gaze away from him. He'd tried numerous times to get her to look at him. She wouldn't. He supposed her modesty was one of the things he adored about her. Still, it grated on his pride that she was so stubborn about it.

The dress she wore was one he'd gotten for her birthday. He sighed. He wanted to lunge at her. He held back. "Kagome, if you want to keep that dress you'd better take it off," he remarked casually enough.

She gasped softly and backed away in concern. *'At least she's looking at you.'* InuYasha made a face.

*'Shuddup.'*

When he sat down on the edge of the bed, it was for her sake alone that he dragged the blanket over his hips, covering the one part of him that she never could look at without nearly crying in embarrassment. Why it would still be so, after nearly six months of marriage, he wasn't sure. Still, as much as it irritated him that she wouldn't look at him, it pleased him, too, that she was still as affected by him as he was by her.

"You wouldn't," she challenged. Then she sighed, likely realizing from past experiences that he would. He'd never meant to harm her, of course. But all too often he wanted her so desperately that he didn't give a damn that he tore many of her clothes in the removal. She never cared until afterwards.

"I gave you fair warning this time," he remarked with a shrug. "I thought you liked that dress."

Her mouth fell open at his words. He didn't smile but it was a close thing. She pursed her lips in a show of disgust but slid off the bed and stalked out of the room.

When she reappeared a few minutes later, she was wearing a thin silk kimono-style robe, tightly belted and effectively hiding all of her skin. Unfortunately, the garment did little to conceal the curves he knew she had and actually accentuated them too damn well for his comfort. *'Either she did that on purpose,'* he thought with a slight growl, *'or she really has no idea what she looks like to me.'* He had a feeling it was the latter. "So you want that shredded, do you?"

“Would you rather that I walked around the house naked?” She flushed as soon as she realized what she had just implied.

InuYasha chuckled. “That’d be great, actually.”

She sat down beside him, drawing her legs up beside her. Her knees peeked out of the crimson silk. He stared and reached out to drag his claws up her leg. She jerked at the tickling sensation but didn’t move away. “You’ve never actually feared me, have you? Other than the once, that is?” He flinched, remembering her reaction to him when she’d regained her memories.

She gently turned his face to look at her and kissed him softly. “It wasn’t that I feared you then. I think I feared my memories because I didn’t understand them, and I didn’t understand who you were to me. I’m sorry I hurt you then. You never let me say that.”

He caught her hand and kissed the palm. “You didn’t have a reason to say it, then or now. When I came through the well, everyone said you’d forgotten. I promised that I wouldn’t do anything to jog your memory. No one knew why you’d forgotten, and they were afraid of what would happen if your memory was restored too quickly. I’m sorry I did that to you.”

“I’m glad I remembered.” She sighed and stared at her hands in her lap again. Then she smiled and quietly laughed.

InuYasha scowled. “What’s so funny?”

She shook her head and peered up at him through her eyelashes. His breath caught as her sparkling, fathomless eyes caught him. “I don’t think I ever had a chance against you. The first time I saw you at school, I felt like I knew you, like I needed to be with you. I think I always knew, even when I couldn’t remember why.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. Words seemed insignificant, not nearly powerful enough to show her what she made him feel. He reached for her instead, locking his hand around her head, drawing her forward as his mouth dropped over hers. She sighed but the sound was lost. Capturing her bottom lip, he nibbled, suckled, licked. She shivered against him, fell into him, asked him for support without saying a word.

Her head fell back; he trailed his mouth over her delicate flesh, tasted her skin, rested his lips against the flutter of her pulse. She held onto him as though she was afraid to let go. He reveled in her whimpers, adored her as she allowed him to dominate her. He pushed the robe from her shoulder. The whisper of silk fell away from her, and his mouth lowered, covering her breast as she arched against him, a guttural moan slipping from her lips. Her hands sank deep in his hair. He couldn’t tell if she was holding him to her or trying to push him back.

Absently thanking Kagome’s sensibilities, InuYasha made quick work of untying the belt that held the robe on her body. The robe fell open, and he shifted, his body covering hers. She pushed against him, asking him for the relief that she knew he’d freely give her. He didn’t move.

He pushed her back against the bed, captured her wrists and pinned them above her head, deliberately taking his time as he tasted her. She whined, tugging at her hands. His grip tightened though not enough to hurt her. "*InuYasha* . . ."

He moved upward, resting his lips against her throat again, rumbling to her as though trying to calm her. It worked but didn't alleviate her desire to touch him. Truth was a bittersweet thing. If she touched him now, he'd die; he knew it.

Leaning on his elbows, staring down into her face. She looked like she was caught in the middle, somewhere between joy and desire. Frustration furrowed her brow. He kissed the lines away. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Kagome looked like she didn't understand what he was asking. She blinked slowly as coherence seeped back over her. Finally she nodded. "I'm sure, *InuYasha*."

Unable to do much more than nod, *InuYasha* stared at her for long moments while emotion overwhelmed him. Little things, unspoken words, promises they'd made . . . the whole of her soul that she freely gave him . . .

"Look at me, Kagome. Stay with me."

She opened her eyes. He could tell that she had to fight to do so. They closed for an instant as he slowly pushed into her. She gasped softly as her eyes snapped open only to fall half-closed again. He wanted to look into her eyes, into her heart and soul. He willed her to understand what he left unsaid.

Her body shuddered under his, as though she wanted to move against him, to give him back what he gave her. He nudged her closer and closer. In her eyes he could see how dangerously close she was to shattering, how precariously she balanced between want and need, between hunger and the satiation of the flesh. He felt her contract around him, an invisible hand that squeezed gently, that clung to him as he did to her.

There was something wholly different from the other times he'd claimed her. As though their bodies knew and understood, the intensity of the moment burst like the sun, splitting the clouds and shining on them with the light of true blessing.

She cried out words that weren't comprehended as he surged, given freely, taken willingly, and then returned in love.

He gathered her close, dragging her with him as he rolled aside. Kagome was both laughing and crying. He could smell her tears. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she sniffled and laughed again. "Thank you."

It took him a moment to realize what she was thanking him for. When he did, he smiled.



~Chapter 46~

~Clash of the Titans~

Kagome peeked around the doorframe, scanning the hallway for any signs of InuYasha's presence. She thought she'd heard the door close a few minutes ago. If he caught her out of bed, he would have a fit.

She made a face. For the last four months, this was how it had been. In the beginning, that had been fine. She'd been able to hold nothing down, especially in the mornings, and hadn't even tried to argue when InuYasha had told her that she would be staying in bed until after the pup was born. It had been horrible, actually, she had to admit. The very next morning, she'd awakened with the insane need to throw up. She'd barely made it into the bathroom, and InuYasha had been beside himself, worrying that they'd made a huge mistake.

But for the last couple of weeks, she'd felt so much better. She wanted to start resuming some of her normal tasks, and he, stubborn hanyou that he was, adamantly refused to allow it. When she'd suggested taking a few courses to keep herself occupied until the baby came, InuYasha had thrown a tantrum, telling her that she wasn't going back to school until well after the baby came because she wasn't up to leaving the house.

She sighed and headed toward the kitchen. She was starving. True, InuYasha had brought her a breakfast tray this morning. But she was too irritated that he wouldn't let her eat at the table like an adult that she hadn't touched the food. He'd brought her things that would be easy on her stomach, toast and a block of tofu. She made a face. Just remembering that was enough to make her ill for completely different reasons.

Cherry jell-o and some fruit salad sounded good. Kagome peeked around the edge of the refrigerator door. *'Still no sign of InuYasha.'* She served herself a small dish of both then put them away. *'Maybe he went for a walk with the dogs or something, long enough for me to—'*

"What the *hell* are you doing out of bed?"

Kagome squeaked as she whirled around to face her very irritated husband. Arms crossed stubbornly over his chest, InuYasha looked like he didn't care to hear her reasons nearly as much as he wanted her to march right back in their room and get in bed. She frowned. "I'm hungry," she explained a little sharply. "And before you say anything, I'm eating it at the table."

He didn't try to stop her as she stomped past him but he did follow her to the table. "Fine, then you're going back to bed, no arguments."

She made another face as she took her time eating.

The doorbell rang. Kagome started to get up only to have InuYasha stay her with a firm hand on her shoulder. “*No.*”

She stifled a sigh but didn’t argue. The food was far more interesting than who was at the door, anyway.

Rin waved InuYasha away as she hurried into the room and came to greet Kagome. “Congratulations! I’ve been by before but *someone*—” she shot InuYasha a significant glance, “wouldn’t let me in. He said that I’d make you sick or some bit of nonsense. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, now. Good enough to get back to doing a few things instead of just laying around in bed.”

“Keh. If you’re done, you need to—”

“She looks great, InuYasha.”

“See?” Kagome argued. “Rin says I look great!”

“You do, but—”

“Kagome needs exercise, too, you know.” Rin’s eyes widened and she grabbed Kagome’s hands. “Why don’t you come with me? I needed to get some new clothes for Nori. Seems like that girl’s growing out of everything she has.”

Kagome hopped up, snatching her empty bowl. InuYasha swiped it out of her hands. “Let me go change, and I’ll be right with you.”

“No, you won’t!” InuYasha insisted. “You need to get back in bed or you’ll—”

“Go insane!” she cut in, making a face at the very idea of getting back in bed just yet. “Come on, InuYasha! I’m fine, really! I’ve never felt better! Anyway, the doctor said that I should get out and go walking or do something to get some exercise, like Rin said. I can’t lie in bed anymore!”

He wasn’t done arguing. Glower in place and his back stiff, she could tell he was digging in for the long haul. “What if you fall? Kagome, you’ve got to be careful.”

“I got pregnant, not clumsy!” she shot back. She turned on her heel to make a grand exit and promptly stumbled.

InuYasha grabbed her and steadied her, his glower disturbingly smug. “See?”

Rin interrupted before the argument could escalate. “Why don’t you come with us, InuYasha? You guys haven’t shopped for the nursery yet, right? Then you can keep an eye on Kagome, and Kagome can get out of the house for awhile. Everyone wins.”

“Kagome—”

She cut him off with a heavy sigh. “I want to go, InuYasha. I can’t just sit around for the next five months because you’re afraid I’ll slip. I’m fine!”

He looked like he wanted to argue. He looked like he was ready to pick her up and carry her off. He didn’t. Instead he stomped into the kitchen and dropped the bowl in the sink with a loud clatter. “Will you lay down when we get back?” he asked grudgingly.

Kagome grinned. “Will you lay down with me?”

InuYasha finally smiled. “All right.” Kagome turned to go get dressed.

“InuYasha . . .”

He turned to glance at Rin before his glower returned to the hallway that Kagome had just run down. “What?”

Rin sighed, brushing back her long black hair with her slim hand. “We all know how protective you are of Kagome, and you’re right, sometimes pregnancies can be difficult. But she’s young, healthy, and smart. She wouldn’t do anything to endanger herself or the baby. Trust her, will you? You’re driving her crazy.”

He made a face. “It’s not that I don’t trust her. I just worry.”

“It’d be pretty sad if you *didn’t* worry. Just try to let her do some things. She’s not going to break.”

“I know.”

The click of Kagome’s sandals drifted to him before she stepped out of the bedroom. She made a face as she stopped in the hallway, covering her slightly protruding belly with her hands. “Losing the figure is a humbling experience,” she commented, making a rueful face.

InuYasha shook his head. “Always were too skinny,” he muttered. Kagome blushed but smiled.

“Shall we go?” Rin piped up.

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“Looking at baby things makes me want another,” Rin said with a sigh as she pulled a tiny sundress off the rack and showed Kagome.

“That’s so cute!”

“Keh!” InuYasha remarked. “That’d look terrible on my son.”

Kagome rolled her eyes as she stood on tip-toe to grab a comforter off the shelf. “And how would you know we’re having a son?” she asked.

“Fathers know these things.”

“Ri-i-i-ight.”

“Sounds like Papa when Mama was pregnant with Toga,” Rin observed.

InuYasha snorted again, disliking any mention of any perceived similarities between himself and Sesshoumaru.

“What do you think?”

He turned to look at what Kagome wanted to show him. She held open a deep red comforter with a picture of two puppies embroidered on it. He grinned. “I suppose you want that?”

Kagome kissed his cheek. “Thanks.”

He took the blanket while she continued browsing. As she and Rin giggled over more baby clothes and other necessities, InuYasha stared at the small comforter again. *‘This’ll do,’* he thought as he stared at it.

Kagome didn’t miss the soft sparkle in his eyes as he gazed at the blanket. She smiled to herself and turned back to the baby items again.

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“Why don’t you put that stuff away tomorrow? You look tired. I knew it was a mistake, agreeing to go shopping.”

Kagome glanced up from the bag she was emptying and grinned. “All right.” She took the hand he offered to help her stand up. Bracing the small of her back with her free hand, Kagome stretched. “I could really use a hot bath,” she mused. “But you’re right, I’m exhausted.”

He led her into their bedroom. She crawled onto the bed and sighed happily. “What do you want for dinner?”

“You take a nap. I’ll wake you up when dinner’s ready.”

She opened an eye and stared at him. “*You’re* going to make dinner?”

“Don’t look so shocked, wench. I can cook . . . some.”

He started out of the bedroom. Kagome called after him. “InuYasha?”

“Hmm?”

“Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?”

He didn’t answer, but he came back and sat beside her. “I guess that’s fair. I used that line on you, didn’t I?”

She smiled. He could tell she was nearly asleep. “What would you have done if I hadn’t stayed that night?”

He chuckled softly, stroking her hair, “I think I would have begged, if I thought it would have kept you here.”

Her smile was vague. He smelled the change in her scent as she drifted off to sleep. Gently, he kissed her forehead and stood, careful not to wake her. Kanaye padded into the room and lay down on the floor beside the bed. InuYasha hunkered down beside the dog. “Watch over her for me, will you?”

Kanaye growled his acknowledgement. InuYasha patted his head and headed out to the kitchen.

“Now,” he muttered to himself as he rubbed his hands together. “What should I make her for dinner?”

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Something light, tickling, rubbed her cheek. Kagome wrinkled her nose and tried to bury her face deeper in the pillow. The tickling persisted. “Come on, Kagome. I know you’re hungry.”

Slowly, she opened her eyes and blinked a few times to clear her vision. InuYasha sat beside her with a smile on his face. His hair was black. She blinked in surprise then grinned. She’d forgotten. It was the night of the new moon. He held a long white feather in his hands, obviously having just used it on her to wake her. She yawned and pushed herself to sit up as she drew in a deep breath. Something smelled delicious . . .

“What’s that?”

He reached over and held out a plate. Kagome stared in surprise at the food. “*You made this?*”

“No. Your mother stopped by just after you went to sleep. She took pity on me.”

Kagome didn’t answer. She made quick work of her food and sighed happily as InuYasha took the empty plate and set it aside again. “You want that bath now?”

“Bath?”

“You said earlier you wanted a bath.”

“You drew my bath?”

He tweaked her nose then kissed it. “Don’t look so surprised. I do nice things, sometimes.”

Kagome leaned forward and quickly kissed his cheek before scrambling off the bed. She stopped in the doorway and glanced back at him. “Come with me?”

“You go on. I’m going to straighten up the kitchen.”

She frowned. “You’re going to *what?*”

“Go *on,*” he grumbled. She didn’t miss the reddening in his cheeks.

She stared at him another moment then scampered off toward the bathroom. She could smell the bubble bath he’d added to the water before she got into the room, but it was the mountain of bubbles made her smile. He hadn’t added enough to overflow the huge garden tub but it was a close thing. *Something about InuYasha and bubbles . . .*

With a soft giggle, she pinned up her hair and settled back in the tub. “Nice,” she breathed. Her eyes widened suddenly as her arms flew up to cover her belly. It was nothing more than an odd fluttering in her abdomen. Still . . . It happened again. “InuYasha!” she yelled. “*InuYasha!*”

Kagome flinched as InuYasha threw open the bathroom door with a resounding crash. He ran to her and knelt beside the tub, the alarm on his features raw, unhidden. “Kagome? What’s wrong?”

She shook her head slowly, eyes still wide. “The baby moved,” she whispered. She gasped and grabbed InuYasha’s hand, pressing it against the movement. “Here . . . *There!* Did you feel it?”

He started to smile then gasped and jerked his hand back, as though whatever he’d felt had hurt him. “Was that—Did that . . . it didn’t hurt, did it?” he demanded, his tone fierce, no nonsense.

Kagome giggled and pushed his hair out of his face. “Nope, it didn’t hurt in the least. It just surprised me, that’s all, I promise.”

He still looked suspicious. “And you’d tell me if it hurt?”

“Yes, I would.” She gasped as the baby moved again, and her smile was bright. Another thought occurred to her, and her grin turned a little devilish. She dragged her fingertips over his forearm slowly, deliberately. “You know, InuYasha . . . there’s room in here for you.”

He shook his head quickly. “I . . . err, don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Scared?”

“ . . . No.”

“Then get in here.”

He stared down with a scowl, as though trying to decide if he should tell her what was really on his mind. At last he sighed and shook his head as he said, “I don’t want to hurt the pup.”

She grinned at his sweet show of concern. “The doctor assured me, InuYasha . . . you won’t hurt the baby.”

He pondered that a few minutes then sighed. “I’m *human*,” he remarked with a dose of disgust.

She leaned out of the tub, capturing his lips in a nibbling kiss. “You’re going to tell me that your human side is going to give up this chance to be with me?”

His eyes were lit with a burning intensity, gaze falling to her slightly swollen breasts. “Well, if you put it that way . . . and you’re *sure* it won’t hurt the pup?”

“Do you think I’d do anything that would hurt our child?”

She hid her smile and looked away as InuYasha stripped off his clothes but not before noticing that the hair on her hanyou’s head wasn’t the only hair on his body that was affected by the new moon changes . . .

This was definitely going to be interesting.

-=-=-=-=-=-

InuYasha sank back in the tub with a soft hiss. The water wasn’t exactly hot, but it wasn’t nearly as cool as the pond, either. But Kagome settled back against him happily, and he supposed that was the only thing that truly mattered. Hesitantly, he placed his hands on her belly, marveling at the taut skin that stuck out noticeably enough on her small frame. She wasn’t big yet, and her size didn’t seem to bother her so much. To him, though, he’d never seen a more beautiful woman in his life. Her skin glowed with an inner happiness, so much so that she seemed to radiate a

warm light. The soft hollows of her body were a little less pronounced yet she was still as wondrous to him now as she had been the first time he'd claimed her.

The pup fluttered under his fingers. Kagome giggled softly. InuYasha could only swallow hard. The ability to show the torrent of emotions was something that defied him. Too many feelings warred for dominance in him: the pride of being able to call Kagome his, the wonder at the gift of life she carried, the humbling knowledge that she wanted this—his pup—more than anything in the world . . . the absolute desire for the woman he held in his arms.

He'd ached for her so badly lately that it was a miracle he was still able to move. Night after night was spent dousing himself in the pond, ruefully reminding himself that it was only for a little while before he could make love to her again. So frightened that he'd hurt her or the pup, InuYasha had been too frightened to reach for her even when she nearly drove him mad with desire.

*"The doctor assured me, InuYasha . . . you won't hurt the baby."*

He grinned, letting his hand brush gently over one of her engorged breasts. She gasped softly, pushing against his palm. The instant heat that ignited under her skin made him moan softly. Kagome turned, drawing his head down, kissing him, toying with his lips, murmuring nonsense that he didn't hear. The taste of her overwhelmed him. Tactile feelings fused together with pure emotion, twisted into something wild and wanton, something gentle and lovely.

His hands on her flesh, he drew back from her to ask her once more, "You're sure?"

Her answer was a brilliant smile, lips trembling as her eyes took on that seductive slant that he knew so well, the one that promised him everything that couldn't be spoken, the melding of their souls, their hearts, their lives. "I've always been sure, InuYasha."

A subtle shift in the rippling water. She touched him, brushed against him only to return with a more solid pressure, an unmistakable caress. He groaned, head falling back. Her lips on his neck, nestled against him, drew him in, let him go only to return again.

His hands roamed over her, learning the newly created curves, the gentle slopes, the planes of her body. She molded herself to him, wrapped her arms around him, her soft gasps filling his ears, her sighs tickling his flesh. He'd wanted her too long, too desperately, and her touch was enough to destroy him. Dragging her hand away from him with a rough growl, he kissed her fiercely. Kagome giggled. The giggle melted into a groan as he let go of her wrist and pulled her closer.

Lips meeting, burning, he willed himself to be slow, gentle with her, tempering his desire to take her with the need to protect her. More precious to him than anything he'd ever known, he wanted to show her in every way, how much he adored her, loved her, needed her. Her body understood what his mouth couldn't speak, his fingers dancing over her until he found the heart of her, the part of her that exploded in heat as he touched her. She cried out, his name echoing off the bathroom walls in the stillness.



## ~~Chapter 47~~

### ~Purity~

“Sit down and wait, InuYasha. Prowling around like the half-breed you are isn’t gong to help the miko, and it’s just frustrating me more and more.”

InuYasha glared at Sesshoumaru. “Drop dead, bastard. What the *fuck* is taking so long?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Toga repeated happily, sitting in the chair beside his father. He was looking at a picture book but had obviously been paying a little too much attention to the adults.

Sesshoumaru shot InuYasha an irritated glare. “Thank you, Inu-baka. Do you have any idea how long it took to get Kagura out of her snit over the Kongousouha?” He turned to his son. “Toga, that isn’t a nice word, and your Uncle Yasha is a baka for saying it around you.”

InuYasha didn’t rise to the bait. He wanted to be with Kagome. He wanted to hold her and tell her that it would be all right. She’d looked a little frightened and in a lot of pain when he’d rushed her into the hospital earlier. He’d gone in with Kagome in the beginning. When her first true pain had come, though, and she’d screamed, InuYasha had pinned the youkai doctor against the wall while issuing dire threats under his breath. They had to bring Sesshoumaru in to remove him from the room, and he hadn’t been allowed back in since.

At least Kagome wasn’t alone. Kagura, Rin, and Mrs. Higurashi were all in there with her. Surely they’d come tell him if something was wrong, wouldn’t they?

He flopped into the seat next to Souta. “InuYasha? Do you think Kagome’s okay? They’ve been in there for forever . . .”

InuYasha turned his head slowly to stab Souta with the darkest glower he could manage before he shot out of his chair and started pacing again. *‘Come on, Kagome . . . you’re okay, right?’*

“She’ll be fine. She’s always been stronger than you,” Shippou remarked. He was lounging in a chair without a care in the world, judging by his demeanor.

“Shut up, Shippou, or I swear, I’ll—”

“Uh-hum.”

The room fell completely quiet. InuYasha stopped mid-stride to stare at Rin. She caught his worried expression and smiled as a tear spilled over to run down her cheek. “What . . . is it?” he heard himself ask in a tone that didn’t seem to sound like him at all.

Rin sniffled and waved her hand. “Oh, I always cry when I’m happy! I didn’t mean to worry you! Kagome’s fine, and . . . you are a father, but—”

That was all InuYasha waited to hear. Rin barely had time to flatten herself against the doorway as InuYasha bolted past. Shippou stood up and wandered over to his wife. He hadn’t missed the ‘but’. “‘But’ what, Rin?”

She turned to stare at her husband as tears filled her eyes again. Her smile trembled precariously, and she drew a deep breath before speaking. “He’s just in for a big surprise; that’s all . . .”

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InuYasha stepped into the delivery room and growled low. Kagura and Mrs. Higurashi were both blocking his view, and he could only see Kagome’s legs outlined under the blankets.

“Congratulations, Mr. Izayoi. The gods have smiled upon you!” one of the nurses said as she patted his arm. The doctor saw InuYasha and tried his best to stay out of his way. InuYasha didn’t spare him a second glance as he slowly stepped toward the bed.

Kagura caught him out of the corner of her eye, and she touched Mrs. Higurashi’s shoulder gently. Kagome’s mother turned and smiled through a veil of tears before kissing her daughter’s cheek. With quietly uttered well wishes, the women left.

“You’re okay, right?” he asked, desperately needing to hear it from her lips that she was fine despite the smile on her face. Hair disheveled, skin pale, dark smudges under her eyes . . . yet her smile was radiant and she reached for his hand.

“I’m fine. Oh! There they are!”

InuYasha turned to see who had come into the room and did a double take. Two nurses, each holding a squirming bundle of blue blankets came in. They placed one in each of Kagome’s arms before leaving as quietly as they had come.

InuYasha’s mouth hung wide open as he stared, mute.

“Do you want to meet your sons, InuYasha?” Kagome asked quietly.

He sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, slowly reaching out to push the blanket down, away from the nearest pup’s face. “Two?” he asked incredulously, finally finding his voice. “Sons?” They were identical, those pups. The same shining silvery white hair, the same tiny pup ears . . . the

ears were still flattened down, hidden by the copious amount of fine hair. They'd perk up in a week or two . . .

She grinned. "We both win, then, don't we?" InuYasha blinked, confused. Kagome giggled. "The names, InuYasha. We can both use the name we liked."

He made a face. It was an argument they'd had for the last nine months, what to name their child. He supposed she was right. He reached over and carefully lifted one of the babies out of Kagome's arm. He rubbed his knuckle against the tiny hand sticking out of the blanket. The baby's fist opened; the hand wrapping around InuYasha's finger. His vision blurred as he noticed the wee claws on each of the pup's fingertips. He blinked furiously. "Your mother wants to name you Kichiro," he said, his voice rough, uneven.

Kagome sighed softly. "And that would make you Ryomaru," she cooed to the other bundle.

InuYasha lifted his gaze. Kagome's eyes were awash with unshed tears, but they were tears of happiness. He opened his mouth to speak, to tell her how much she meant to him, how much he loved her. Somehow, words didn't seem right. He scooted forward and kissed her gently.

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"InuYasha, can you get that?" Kagome called from the bedroom as the doorbell rang.

He scooped up Ryomaru and headed for the front door. Kichiro squealed in protest. InuYasha grinned. His sons really hated having baths . . .

Sesshoumaru entered the house and took Ryomaru out of InuYasha's arms. Kagura shook her head as her children swarmed InuYasha's legs.

"Uncle Yasha!" Toga exclaimed. "When Ryo and Kichiro get bigger, can I play with them?"

InuYasha grinned. "I don't see why not."

"Ryomaru. A good, strong name," Sesshoumaru remarked.

Kagome came around the corner with Kichiro snuggled in her arms. Kagura reached out for the baby, and Kagome let her take him.

"Fine sons, InuYasha. You finally did something right, though I doubt you had much at all to do with it. I've little reservations that it was purely the miko's influence at work."

"Jealous, Sesshoumaru? I had two sons at once and you were only able to produce one?"

"InuYasha!" Kagome chastised, her cheeks pinkening as she rolled her eyes.

“Baka,” Sesshoumaru remarked blandly, ignoring InuYasha’s not-so-subtle jibe.

InuYasha snorted as Kagome lifted Aiko into her arms. In the six weeks since the pups were born, he had to admit, Kagome’s figure seemed unaffected by the occasion . . . other than some marked swelling in certain areas . . .

The doorbell rang again. Kagome led Kagura and Sesshoumaru into the living room while InuYasha opened the door to admit Shippou, Rin, and Kagome’s family.

Mrs. Higurashi gave InuYasha a hug and kissed his cheek as everyone else made a beeline for the babies. “And how’s the proud father holding up?”

“It’s not so bad,” he allowed with a small smile. “I could do without the diapering business, but not bad.”

She smiled and headed off to locate Kagome and the boys. InuYasha followed slowly, pausing in the doorway just to watch. Shippou was making faces at Kichiro in an effort to make the baby laugh. Kichiro little face screwed up just before he opened his mouth to howl.

“Look what you did!” Rin chided as she took the upset baby from her husband.

Kagura leaned in to whisper something to Sesshoumaru. He nodded then bent down to whisper something back. Kagura flushed but smiled.

Souta and Kagome’s grandfather stared over Mrs. Higurashi’s shoulder at Ryomaru. Souta tweaked Ryo’s ear.

Kagome slid up beside InuYasha, her arms snaking around his waist. She kissed his cheek, and he kissed her forehead. “I don’t think we’re going to get to hold them the rest of the day,” he remarked.

Kagome sighed. “They are loved.”

“So are you.”

She squeezed him then let her arms drop before taking his hand and leading him back toward the front door.

“Where are we going?” he asked as she pulled the door closed behind herself.

“I asked Mama to watch the boys, just for a little while.”

He grinned. “So where are you taking me?”

“Wherever you want to go. I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

The idea of leaving his pups wasn't a great one, as far as he was concerned. But Kagome looked so hopeful . . . Maybe, if only for a little while. Kneeling down on the ground, he looked back over his shoulder. "Well, what are you waiting for?" She giggled as she climbed onto his back. "Hold on."

She snuggled against him then laughed softly as he pushed off the ground.

-----

Kagome touched the hole in Goshinboku's trunk, the scar left behind from InuYasha's forced suspension. InuYasha rested his hands on her hips, his cheek resting against her temple. "Regrets?"

"What do you mean?"

"You could have left me here. It would have been less trouble."

Her hand dropped away from the tree, and she turned to frown up at him. "Why would you even think that?"

He sank down on the grass. "I was just thinking about where I'd be if you hadn't come along. I'd probably still be pinned here, standing in your back yard." He chuckled then sighed. "You freed me. You stayed with me."

She knelt down beside him. "I *belonged* with you. I still do."

Leaning his head back against the tree, InuYasha smiled. "We'll see if you're still saying that when the pups are driving you crazy."

Kagome reached out, smoothing InuYasha's bangs off of his face. He caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. She smiled and asked, "Do you ever wish you'd stayed in the past? You were comfortable there."

He shrugged. He hadn't thought about that in a long time. "There, here . . . doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is where you are."

She grinned and scooted closer to him so she could lay her head on his shoulder. "I don't think I ever dreamed things would work out this way."

"Is that bad?"

"No! I just didn't dare to believe that this could happen . . . that I could touch the moon . . . with you."



## ~Epilogue~

“InuYasha!”

InuYasha flinched at the irritation in Kagome’s voice, but his tone remained calm as he spoke to the small bundle in his arms. “Hear that, Gin? Your brothers are probably giving your mama grief. Should we go see what sort of mischief they’re into?”

Gin cooed softly, her grip on InuYasha’s finger tightening. InuYasha kissed her downy soft cheek and tightened his hold on her before he hopped down from the tree.

Kagome stood, arms crossed over her chest, shooting him a look meant to smite him on the spot. Kichiro sat on the porch with the dogs while Ryomaru—the devil—was trying to pluck individual hairs off his brother’s head. “Mama!” Kichiro whined. “Ryo won’t stop!”

“Be nice to your brother, Ryomaru,” she said over her shoulder before she turned back to stare at InuYasha again. “Tell me I was seeing things and that you really *didn’t* have our infant daughter up in that tree?” Kagome said, her voice particularly even, which meant, in his mind, that he was about to catch hell.

“She likes it,” he replied defensively, “just like her mama.”

“Papa’s in trouble,” Ryomaru pointed out needlessly with his nearly four year-old sing-song voice so like his mother’s. Kichiro giggled.

So to stave off the ear-blistering that he knew was coming, InuYasha hurried past Kagome toward the back door, pausing only long enough to ruffle the boys’ silvery hair in passing. “Gin needs a diaper change,” he explained as he all but ran into the house.

Dammit laughed at him.

“That’s dangerous, you know.”

InuYasha glanced up from changing Gin’s diaper. Kagome was leaning in the doorway though she had a slight smile on her face. “She looks just like you.”

Kagome made a face. “She has your coloring. All my children have your coloring. How fair is that?”

“They’ll have yours once a month.”

“That’s okay. I rather prefer your looks.”



***We miss Miroku and Sango!***

*Ok, so this isn't a question. It is perhaps the most frequent message I receive. Thing is, they never came through the well.*

***Toga?***

*Believe it or not, I've gotten massive response about this child. I've got some ideas for a continuation, based on Toga, which ought to actually answer a few of the Sesshoumaru questions, too . . . and may give me a chance to further explore the shining children who weren't highlighted nearly as much as I would have liked: Kichiro, Ryomaru, and Gin! It's up! **Purity 2: Defiance**, a story that centers around my favorite child who has grown up and has decided that he doesn't want the same things that his father wants for him . . .*

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***FINAL VERSION.***

*Blanket disclaimer for this fanfic (will apply to this and all other chapters in **Purity**): I do not claim any rights to InuYasha or the characters associated with the anime/manga. Those rights belong to Rumiko Takahashi, et al. I do offer my thanks to her for creating such vivid characters for me to terrorize.*

*~Sue~*